

Holcim- Report

A scandal research from
Greenpeace Switzerland



1 Executive summary

Confronted with an accusation by the Responsible Business Initiative that **LafargeHolcim** is endangering people and the environment through its operations in Ewekoro (Nigeria)¹, Beat Hess, chairman of the board of the Swiss-based company, stated publicly that the world's largest cement group is committed to adhering to the **highest standards** wherever it operates. The **LafargeHolcim** chief cited **LafargeHolcim's** code of conduct, its strong system for checking risk and compliance with local laws and international regulations, and its thorough human rights due diligence methodology including impact assessments and mitigation action^{2, 3}.

For Greenpeace, which has always been committed to combating pollution by multinational companies and to an internationally binding set of rules for corporate responsibility and liability for damage, this was reason enough to take a closer look at the group. The question is whether **LafargeHolcim's** assertions are true, and whether such **voluntary commitments** are sufficient to protect people and the environment from the negative impacts of the globally active Swiss group.

The results of this Greenpeace study are deeply sobering. A **computer search** quickly turned up **122 cases**⁴ of **scandalous corporate misconduct, primarily environmental pollution and human rights violations**, for which **LafargeHolcim** is responsible or ought to be held responsible. Most of these scandals are ongoing and involve 34 different countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America as well as Europe. At issue is environmental destruction; air, soil, water and drinking water pollution; illegal limestone mining; illegal hazardous waste incineration; excessive emissions; poor monitoring standards; noise pollution; health hazards; violations of labour and trade union rights; child labour; human rights violations; regulatory violations; tax evasion; cartel agreements; corruption and support for terrorism. In most cases local laws are dis-

regarded, and international standards are violated. All too often the company uses outdated equipment and technology, exposing people, animals and the environment to harmful emissions.

In three countries **on three continents** – Cameroon, Brazil and India – Greenpeace conducted **in-depth investigations** which were complicated by COVID-19-related lockdowns (which restricted freedom of movement and access to witnesses) and in some instances premature rainfall (which washed away evidence such as cement dust emissions). Nevertheless, the following picture emerges in summary form:

Cameroon⁵: Owing to a technical defect, since 2018 the cement plant of **LafargeHolcim's** subsidiary **Cimencam** in Figuil (Cameroon) has been regularly emitting large quantities of partially corrosive and toxic waste dust (cement raw meal from the kiln system and ground raw material for cement production). This waste is deposited around the area of a weekly public market and, to a lesser extent, in front of a primary school, which can lead to hazardous exposure due to wind and weather. People complain of chronic and acute irritation of the skin, mucous membranes, eyes and respiratory tract. The operations in the cement plant and the open dumping of such large quantities of corrosive and toxic waste dust, especially near a weekly public market, violate international standards of cement production⁶ and would clearly be illegal⁷ in Switzerland. Disposal of this waste in Swiss landfills would also be prohibited owing to high chromium (VI) levels⁸. Chromium (VI) is highly corrosive, carcinogenic and toxic to both humans and aquatic life.

Brazil⁹: Problems with the **LafargeHolcim** plant in Barroso (Brazil) date back to 1955 and are as old as the company itself. Today there are still frequent incidents and pollutant emissions, which cover the roofs of the town with a layer of dust. Both local and nation-

1 <https://konzern-initiative.ch/beispiel/lafargeholcim> [accessed 12.9.2020]

2 https://www.lafargeholcim.com/sites/lafargeholcim.com/files/atoms/files/lafargeholcim_responds_to_allegations_related_to_dust_emissions_in_nigeria_de.pdf and https://www.lafargeholcim.com/sites/lafargeholcim.com/files/atoms/files/lafargeholcim_responds_to_allegations_related_to_dust_emissions_in_nigeria_en.pdf [accessed 12.9.2020]

3 <https://www.lafargeholcim.com/additional-esg-resources> [accessed 12.9.2020]

4 <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1kHp88HChZ4MF96oXU7RXKf5rkqabMUjKR8x9RBFzL0s/edit-gid=1992049752> [accessed 27.9.2020]

5 http://act.gp/LafargeHolcim-Report_Kamerun [accessed 28.9.2020]

6 EU Industrial Emissions Directive 2010/75/EU (BAT Ref. Document, pp. 93 and 113 ff.): <https://ec.europa.eu/irc/en/publication/reference-reports/best-available-techniques-bat-reference-document-production-cement-lime-and-magnesium-oxide> [accessed 30.9.2020]

7 In Switzerland, this type of cement production would violate environmental legislation, namely the Ordinance on Air Pollution Control (OAPC) and the provisions of the Waste Ordinance (ADWO), as well as general principles of environmental law.

8 Ordinance on the Avoidance and the Disposal of Waste (Waste Ordinance, ADWO, Annex 5): <https://www.admin.ch/opc/en/classified-compilation/20141858/index.html> [accessed 23.9.2020]

9 http://act.gp/LafargeHolcim-Report_Brasilien [accessed 28.9.2020]

al legislation lag behind laws of other Brazilian states and international standards set by the UNEP¹⁰, the World Bank¹¹ and the EU¹², leading to “questionable interpretations” as to whether the emission limits for dioxins and furans as well as other pollutants are being adhered to or not. Even the public prosecutor’s office in Minas Gerais has criticized **LafargeHolcim** for not applying standards in Barroso that it is required to apply elsewhere in Brazil and worldwide. There is strong evidence of epidemiologically significant adverse health effects, in that a disproportionately large part of the population of Barroso suffers from respiratory diseases. These diseases are the most common reason for hospitalization and the second most frequent cause of death.

India¹³: Although safety concerns and the COVID-19 situation prevented the carrying out of in-depth field research, the available information shows that the **LafargeHolcim** plant in Ropar, Punjab (North India) systematically violates local laws and basic international standards, such as the air quality guidelines of WHO¹⁴ and the World Bank¹⁵. Government documents made public under freedom of information laws show that the **LafargeHolcim** subsidiary **Ambuja Cement** has built a fly ash drying plant, which generates high emissions, without a permit and therefore is operating it illegally. Moreover, the improper transport and handling of fly ash and clinker violate Indian legal provisions. Reports and complaints from those affected asserting that the activities of **Ambuja Cement** constitute a significant burden for the population in the surrounding villages are highly credible. Equally credible are claims that the persons concerned cannot rely on the

relevant authorities to enforce human health and environmental protection laws or to hold the offending companies responsible. There are shocking images of fugitive dust immissions from the cement production inside private homes. It has been reported that the dust causes irritation of the skin, and even the small-est particles burn the eyes.

The facts and evidence are overwhelming, and the large number of **LafargeHolcim** scandal cases found through the computer search itself is a scandal. These incidents are unacceptable for a Swiss corporation such as **LafargeHolcim** and for Switzerland as its corporate headquarters. The “**scandal research**” carried out by Greenpeace points to a systemic problem that requires appropriate solutions. **LafargeHolcim**’s voluntary commitments and measures are obviously insufficient. All the more so as, according to experts, the former **Holcim** standards have deteriorated within the new group since the merger with Lafarge. In this sense, the present “**Holcim Report**” is a wake-up call: better and binding rules governing corporate responsibility and liability for damage caused by global corporations are urgently needed. Similar measures are also called for in the Responsible Business Initiative¹⁶, which will be voted on by the Swiss population on 29 November 2020.

The message of the Responsible Business Initiative is clear: Anyone who damages the environment must repair the damage. Anyone who causes harm to others must be held accountable.

10 UNEP / Basel Convention (Technical Guidelines on the Environmentally Sound Co-processing of Hazardous Wastes in Cement Kilns, p. 38): http://www.basel.int/Portals/4/Basel_Convention/docs/pub/techguid/cement/tg-cement-e.pdf [accessed 23.9.2020]

11 World Bank / IFC (Environmental, Health, and Safety Guidelines for Cement and Lime Manufacturing, p. 20): <https://www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/52592e0e-8475-4231-ba50-aeab432e8e3c/20180719-Draft+for+2nd+Consultation-Cement+Lime+Mnfg.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CVID=m18Xzc7> [accessed 23.9.2020]

12 EU Industrial Emissions Directive 2020/75/EU (Guideline, p. 86 ff.): <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:02010L0075-20110106&from=EN> [accessed 23.9.2020]

13 http://act.gp/LafargeHolcim-Report_Indien [accessed 28.9.2020]

14 WHO Air quality guidelines values: [https://www.who.int/en/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/ambient-\(outdoor\)-air-quality-and-health](https://www.who.int/en/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/ambient-(outdoor)-air-quality-and-health) [accessed 28.9.2020]

15 World Bank / IFC (Environmental, Health, and Safety Guidelines for Cement and Lime Manufacturing, p. 9 ff.): <https://www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/52592e0e-8475-4231-ba50-aeab432e8e3c/20180719-Draft+for+2nd+Consultation-Cement+Lime+Mnfg.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CVID=m18Xzc7> [accessed 23.9.2020]; and World Bank / IFC (General EHS Guidelines, p. 8 f.): <https://www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/29f5137d-6e17-4660-b1f9-02bf561935e5/Final+-+General+EHS+Guidelines.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CVID=jOWim3p> [accessed 23.9.2020]

16 <https://konzern-initiative.ch/> [accessed 29.9.2020]

Cameroon, Figuil

Holcim in Figuil and dust deposits on public market area.



Brazil, Barroso

Holcim in Barroso.



India, Ropar, Punjab

Holcim in Ropar.

