

Background review



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Summary

For Nigeria, after the black gold has come the golden. But does it bear with it the similar consequences of a resource curse? In particular, do its 'developmental benefits' outweigh its negative environmental and socio-economic impacts especially for its host communities? This paper attempts to predict the socio-economic impacts related to oil palm plantations in Nigerian forest landscapes. This study is germane taking into account the devastating effect of oil palm plantations in Southeast Asia, and the recent inquest of oil palm plantations into West Africa. It becomes imperative to study its impact on its host communities, the most vulnerable and often overlooked segment of society– women and children.

Oil palm cultivation by smallholder farmers is not foreign to Nigeria and has been considered a cash crop by local communities. For instance, in South East Nigeria, oil palm trees are referred to as "Osisi na ami ego" ('the money tree') as every part of the plant is considered to be of economic benefit. However, oil palm plantations and the challenges that accompany them are new to the country. One of the effects that is becoming visible is the tension between conserving Nigeria's rapidly depleting forestlands, and the economic development oil palm plantations supposedly portend. Another set of effects are its socio-economic consequences on its host communities – in particular, women and children, who are often invisible to policy makers.

Introduction

There has been a vast documentation of the negative environmental and social impacts of oil palm plantations in the rapidly expanding oil palm production in South East Asia given of course the proliferation of such plantations in the region. However, there have been very little research done into their impacts in West Africa, in particular Nigeria, and specifically on the most vulnerable populations – especially women and children.

The oil palm tree is native to West Africa, and may be found in Angola, Cameroon, Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Togo. Valuing the use of this versatile oil derived from this tree, the British commenced its exportation mainly from Nigeria from 1832 and by 1911, during which period it exported about 157,000 tonnes of the produce (75%

of which it derived from Nigeria) (Walker, 2010). Eventually, the British exported the plant to South East Asia about 60 years ago, and has been grown in commercial quantities especially in Malaysia and Indonesia. By 1966, both countries had exceeded the entire produce of West Africa. By 1983, Malaysia had produced 3 million tonnes, dwarfing the entire West African production of 1.3 million tonnes (FAO, 2002). The global demand for palm oil continues to grow, and is today valued at about \$50 Billion (African Farming, 2014) and may triple within the next 50 years (Sustainable Nutrition for All, n.d.).

While the foregoing has positively impacted the economy of South East Asia by providing jobs for millions of people, and also created many businesses in its value chain that has enhanced the region's

development, it has had several widely and deeply felt negative environmental and socio-economic impacts on oil palm plantation host communities, and their neighbouring communities. A major impact has been the deforestation due to the expansion of oil palm plantation in the region.

FAO Land Cover Data suggest that almost half of oil palm plantations in South-East Asia (in particular, Malaysia and Indonesia) have replaced forest lands (Varsha et al, 2016). Interestingly, it has lost the most forest land than any other region globally (Laurance, 2007). Consequent to the loss of vast forestland has also been the loss and skewing of the region's bio-diversity (Hughes, 2017). The loss of water in traditional swamp areas due to plantation drainages also make the available lands unsuitable for cultivating certain crops by small farm holders. The runoff and palm oil mill effluents often find their way into, and pollute the water bodies on which the communities around the plantations/ palm oil mills depend.

In addition to the impacts of changes in bio-diversity to the cultivation of other crops cultivated by plantation host communities, the scarcity of available lands has made them more expensive and out of reach for smallholder farmers. Since oil palms tend to take over the economy of the communities in which they are situated, jobs options for locals are often restricted to these plantations, which often exploit workers, and have unsavoury labour practices (Accenture for Humanity United). The cost of wood which is driven up due to deforestation means that local communities cannot afford them for construction purposes, and the mono-cultivation of oil palm also drives up the prices of food staples in the region (Sheil et al., 2009). There have also been several reports of conflicts resulting from land scarcity, insecurity due to migrant labourers, and host community clashes with plantation companies' due to their loss of water, lands and livelihoods (Sheil et al., 2009).

Recent restrictions on logging and land acquisition have driven oil palm investments back to West African countries, including Nigeria. A bevy of foreign companies including big players such as Wilmar, Olam, Sime Darby, Golden Veroleum and Equatorial Palm Oil (The Economist, 2014) are scrambling for available plantation land in Africa, between West Africa and the Congo, 1.8million Hectares of land have been conceded to oil palm plantation and according to a research company, 1.4million hectares is still being sought (The Economist, 2014).

On the surface, the blitz of investment by these companies portends development opportunities for

these African countries. The government of Gabon for instance estimates that Olam's investment in their country will create 15,000 new jobs (The Economist, 2016). The start of the shift of oil palm plantation to West Africa has nonetheless not been without controversy, given the negative antecedence in South East Asia. The companies that are seeking to establish their business on the continent come with some damaging track record and within the short period of their incursion into West Africa, they have started to live up to their notoriety. They have been trailed with allegations of land grabs, environmental degradation, and negative human rights impacts on their host communities. In some instances, they have resulted in conflicts and continue to generate controversies. Wilmar, the world's largest oil palm company, which has recently forayed into the Nigeria for example was ranked as the least sustainable company by The Newsweek Green Rankings (Alimenterre, 2013). The big question therefore is that: will the socioeconomic costs of the negative impacts of oil palm production in the region outweigh their benefits?

Oil palm plantations in Nigeria

As noted earlier, oil palms are indigenous to West Africa, however, even before the introduction of large scale plantations to the sub-region, oil palms trees were considered to be economically viable cash crops and contributed to rural economies especially for smallholder farmers. In South East Nigeria, oil palm trees are referred to as "Osis na ami ego" (The Money Tree) as every part of the plant is considered of economic benefit. Currently, about 80% of Nigeria's oil palm is cultivated by smallholder farmers (BBC News, n.d.) covering a combined area of at least 1.65-3million hectares (Walker, 2010); similar practices exist across West Africa. However, the dynamics of the cultivation of this cash crop is fast changing in the region with the influx of large scale oil palm plantations.

Various state governments in southern Nigeria had in past, unsuccessfully attempted to stimulate regional economic growth by investing in about 72,000 hectares of oil palm plantations. This was inclusive of 6,750 hectares of oil palm within an area thought to be one of the largest remnants of tropical rainforest in Nigeria held by the Rivers state government in partnership with Risonpalm Ltd (Walker, 2010) in the 1990s. Due to controversies that trailed the environmental impact of the project, and its mismanagement, the project failed, but was later revived. Presco, the subsidiary of a Belgian company holds two oil palm plantations with a total coverage area of 13,000 hectares at the Obaretin and Ologbo

areas of Edo state, and another 3,000 hectares at Cowan Estate, Delta State (Walker, 2010).

At the core of the oil palm plantation trade in Nigeria, were the State run oil palm estates in Cross River state which several times became inactive due to poor management. There were attempts to revive these plantations by privatizing them. Among the plantations sold during this period was the Kwa Falls Plantation which was sold to Obasanjo farms. Some of the privatization initiatives however failed when the investors could not meet the payment deadlines (Schoneveld, 2014). In 2002 however, the government changed its approach of privatizing the various plantations in the state, including the oil palm plantations and decided instead to lease them to smallholder farmers for rent, under a scheme known as the "One Man, One Plot scheme" with the strategic objective of micro-level poverty alleviation (Schoneveld, 2014). Under this arrangement, the government provided smallholder farmers with seedlings and cleared the lands. Less than a decade later, they again changed strategy and declared the scheme unprofitable, alleging that the smallholders lacked the skillset to effectively manage the plots allocated to them (Schoneveld, 2014).

As part of its obligations under the G8 New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition, the Nigerian government also entered into a Memorandum of Understanding with Wilmar which committed to developing 50,000 hectares of oil palm (Friends of the Earth US, Environmental Rights Action Nigeria, 2015). Resultantly, in a joint venture with PZ Cussons, Wilmar purchased several plantation sites in 2011/2012 in Cross Rivers state Nigeria. Its current holdings include plantations at Baise, Ibiae, Obasanjo, and Calaro concessions, all covering an area of almost 30,000 hectares. (Business Day, 2014). It therefore appears that the epicentre of the incursion of the oil palm business is in Cross River state of Nigeria. The joint venture in addition has built a palm oil refinery in Lagos with the intention to sell its product to the local market (Business Day, 2014). In a newspaper report, the joint venture described its investment as 'only the beginning' and revealed plans to expand their holdings to reach a total of 240,000 hectares and provide jobs for over 250000 persons in a period of between 5-6 years (Business Day, 2014).

Is all truly well?

While without doubt, there are economic advantages to the oil palm plantations springing up in Nigeria, there are inherent negative impacts which clearly need to be addressed. The most apparent negative

impact is the loss of forestland - an essential ecological and economic resource which is fast dwindling in Africa. Along with the loss of land is the loss of biodiversity. Already there is copious evidence that the biodiversity of the avid green forestland in Nigeria is fast disappearing. Incidentally, Cross River state, the allure of oil palm plantations in Nigeria is also home to the Oban-Korup Forest the largest closed-canopy rainforest in Nigeria, which is houses some of the most diverse and rarest species on the continent. The Oban Forest Reserve was created in 1912 by the then colonial government (Powell, 2007). It was in 1991 granted recognition as a National Park (WCS Nigeria, n.d.). A good portion of the land mapped out for Obasanjo Plantation falls within the Oban-Korup National Park. While the government appears to be interested in conserving what is left of the fast diminishing rain forest, it is desperate to develop the economic potentials of the state - hence, the conflicting priorities between conservation and 'agricultural development'.

Realizing the imminent environmental disaster facing the country and its own vulnerability, the government of Cross Rivers state set up its Governor's Forest and Climate Task Force to implement subnational REDD+ policies (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) utilising the Readiness Preparation Proposal (RPP). The REDD + RPP makes stringent provisions which directly affect the land ownership structures of communities indigenous to the parameters of forest lands. A core problem, according to the communities is that they were not duly consulted by the state government before the policy implementation plans were developed and that they would be further dispossessed of community land under the Governor's Forest and Climate Task Force (Lang, 2016). Curiously, Wilmar apparently anticipates access to more land by the projections discussed earlier. Under the Lands Use Act of 1978, the governor of a state holds the land in trust for the people and therefore has the discretionary powers to utilize the forestlands that have not been gazetted by the Federal government, or, under the customary land holding of indigenous communities, as the governor deems fit (Lang, REDD in Cross River, Nigeria: "Property rights, militarised protectionism, and carbonised exclusion", 2017). The host communities of Akpet, Betem, Idoma and Igbofia-Ehom attest to the fact that they had willingly entered into an agreement with the government company - Eastern Nigeria Development Corporation (now defunct) in 1963 granting the government company use of their land for the development of an oil palm plantation for 99 years (Environmental Justice Atlas , 2014). As earlier mentioned, the government initiated plantations were epileptic and eventually were abandoned till

the government conceded these same lands out to Wilmar. The problem is that this agreement predates the Land Use Act of 1978, which in essence could have dispossessed these communities of the ownership of their land. However, since the government was no longer utilizing the lands for 'overriding public interest', their ownership should have reverted back to the indigenous communities from which they were derived. The new arrangement with the company was therefore not done with the free, prior or informed consent of these host communities, which had – after the failure of the government plantation, repossessed their lands for agricultural use as smallholder farmers (Environmental Justice Atlas, 2014).

Failure to engage communities for their Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC)

The oil palm plantations host communities in Cross River state, claim that unlike the 1963 agreement, in which government had sought their consent and paid compensation to affected landlords, they were not adequately consulted before their lands were conceded to the oil palm company in 2002 (Schoneveld, 2014). According to them, while there was some semblance of consultations, only community chiefs were consulted. They further argued that community chiefs could not have fully represented the interests of the communities and individual land owners (Friends of the Earth. Environmental Rights Action Nigeria, 2016).

In the 2002 allocations round to local companies such as Real Oils Company, the state government failed to protect the interests of the host communities by leaving their traditional chief to negotiate the terms of their agreements with the companies and how much compensation was due to them without providing detailed information on the transaction (Schoneveld, 2014).

The Nigerian government is a signatory to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. More importantly, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights guarantees this right to indigenous communities as was demonstrated in the Endorois' case, in which the African Courts, relying on Articles 8, 14, 17, 21 and 22, asserted the rights to religious practice, to property, to culture, to the free disposition of natural resources, and to development. (Centre for Minority Rights Development (Kenya) and Minority Rights Group International on behalf of Endorois Welfare Council v. Kenya,, 2003) In addition, the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil, of which Wilmar Limited is a member requires the free, prior, and informed consent of host communities and

lays out a detailed process for this (Forest Peoples Programme, 2015). Specifically, it mandates that "evidence shall be available to show that communities are represented through institutions or representatives of their own choosing, including legal counsel". It also requires that their impact assessments be evidenced by the participation of affected parties (Forest Peoples Programme, 2015), which in the case of communities affected by the Wilmar plantation has not been achieved (Friends of the Earth. Environmental Rights Action Nigeria, 2016).

The government

The Cross River State government has been the core facilitator for oil palm and other plantations in its state. Confronted with dwindling resources from crude oil revenue, it was quick to latch on to the inspiration that its then state governor had acquired from his visit to Wilmar's plantation in Indonesia, and his vision to replicate a similar 'success' in his state, and draw in essential income through the rent and royalties he believed such a large expanse single plantation would bring to his state (Friends of the Earth. Environmental Rights Action Nigeria, 2016). What the government failed to do however was to evaluate the impact of such a project holistically, and to fully investigate the reputation of the company that they were inviting to 'revolutionize' their state.

The Cross Rivers Government therefore aided large companies in particular – Wilmar, to acquire oil palm estates in the state. Their service has however not been guided by due diligence or a set of guidelines to measure and mitigate negative impacts (Schoneveld, 2014). The 2010 acquisitions by Wilmar was however different from the 2002 allocations in which it had failed to intervene in the company's interaction with its host communities. It became more vested in their negotiations, explaining that Wilmar was not an indigenous community and hence did not yet understand the nuances of local host communities (Schoneveld, 2014). It therefore set up a bureau to monitor the process. Again, in this round of negotiations, the focus of the consultations were the community chiefs, rather than a larger and more democratic representation of the entire communities. Even then, the leaders had expressed scepticism but were eventually persuaded to accept the proposed project, and received financial compensation alongside promises of some CSR projects in their communities.

The Federal Government's declaration of the Oban and Okwango forests as forest reserves in 1991, would appear to a clog in the wheel of the state government's

aspiration to expand its revenue base through the development of plantations in the state. Its allocation of part of the Oban-Korup forest reserve to the Obasanjo Plantation is an evidence of this friction. In addition, in its quest to fulfil its REDD+ obligations, it is infringing on the rights of indigenous host communities to utilize land for subsistence as it tries to meet its carbon obligations while developing virgin areas (Lang, 2017).

Failure to conduct environmental and social impact assessments

Section 12(1) The Environmental Impact Assessment Act of 1992 requires that agricultural projects which cover more than a land mass of 500 hectares, or displaces more than 100 households require an environmental impact assessment. The law also envisages multi-stakeholder inputs for environmental impact assessments, giving room for stakeholder comments (Section 7) and that the public will be notified of the availability of the report and where it may be obtained (Section 24). Given the magnitude of Wilmar's concessions in Cross Rivers state, which in addition to the large area they would cover could force the eviction of over 10,000 persons and impact on the livelihoods of about 20,000 persons (Friends of the Earth. Environmental Rights Action Nigeria, 2016); they are required by virtue this law to conduct – at the least – an environmental impact assessment that would have sought the participation of their host communities. The oil palm host communities claim that they were not informed of the conduct of any environmental impact assessment and that they were not consulted in its process if it were ever conducted (Environmental Justice Atlas, 2014). When the Rainforest Resources Development Centre filed a case against Wilmar for among other things, its failure to conduct an environmental and social impact assessment in November 2012, the company quickly produced one, conducted by 3 consultants who were staff of the state Ministry of Environment in March 2013. The veracity of the EIA conducted by these consultants is questionable, especially because it was to be vetted by the Cross Rivers State Ministry of Environment. It is noteworthy that the State Ministry of Environment issued an EIA Compliance letter and "Provisional Compliance Certificates" for Ibiae and Calaro Plantations; when this Ministry's duty was to monitor compliance with the regulations of the Federal Ministry of Environment and not to usurp their authority by issuing certifications that fall within Federal purview (Friends of the Earth. Environmental Rights Action Nigeria, 2016).

Friends of the Earth in their publication "Exploitation and Empty Promises" list lacunas in the ESIA conducted by Wilmar as:

1. The ESIA for Ibiae, Calaro, and Obasanjo plantations were not conducted before the commencement of the plantation projects.
2. The ESIA failed to state the number of people who could possibly be impacted by plantation projects.
3. It failed to acknowledge impacts of the Obasanjo Plantation overlap on the Cross River National Park and the Ekinta Forest Reserve, especially as the affected areas have not been de-reserved as required under Federal laws (National Park Act (1991); Cross Rivers State Forest Laws (2010)).

Key impact of oil palm plantation on the rights of women and children

At the heart of law, development, governance and business lies people and communities. While they are potentially the core beneficiaries of commercial and development activities, they often bear the brunt of the worst effects of businesses and suffer the violation of their rights. For instance, while plantations potentially will create jobs, they need fewer manpower than smallholder farms. Mono-cropping a large expanse of land also means that indigenous communities will be faced with the challenge of growing sufficient food to sustain their families. They will also be exposed to the high health care costs of the environmental impacts of such projects.

Cross River state, the epicentre of oil palm plantations in Nigeria is a coastal state located in the South-South region of the country and shares border with Cameroon to the East, at which site it also shares the territory of the Oban-Kran rainforest reserve. It is renowned in its status as one of the world's biodiversity hotspots. The state is made up of three major ethnic groups and has a population of about 3.8 million persons with roughly equal population of men and women (National Population Commission). The major occupations in this state are agriculture, fishing, basket making, and tourism (My Top Business Ideas). In the Pecking Order of this society as in almost all, the most indigent and vulnerable tend to suffer most from the dark side of business activities. In Nigeria, as in most developing countries, that translates to women and children.

Women and oil palm: a sociological perspective

As in most states across Nigeria, gender inequity is pervasive. Challenged by illiteracy, poverty, and debilitating cultures which militate against their socio-economic advancement, most women live in the rural

areas, are economically vulnerable, suffer various forms of gender based violence, and an inability to maximize their productive potentials (Bassey, n.d.). In spite of the foregoing, they play a cardinal role in household food security and are engaged in virtually every aspect of food production (Ben, 2015). As primary caregivers, the impacts they suffer ricochet to the children for whom they are primary carers.

As earlier asserted, oil palm is considered a cash crop of great economical worth in West African states, including Nigeria. In Nigeria, every part of the tree is considered economically viable, and within the socio-economic context of smallholder farming, women are considered essential human resource in the processing of various products from the tree. Some of the roles often ascribed to women in processing oil palm products are the manual processing of palm kernels into palm oil, the marketing and sale of palm kernel palm oil, processing and sale of palm kernel oil from the oil palm kernel seed, and the processing and sale of local brooms, baskets, and other products derived from non-fruit parts of oil palm trees. The socio-political economics of oil palm plantations will therefore impact them, and in diverse ways.

Gender roles and gender expectations

As in most societies, gender roles differ and impact the way men and women experience the world. The activities of men are more often regarded as being economically productive, while most of those carried out by women and children are considered to be socially productive in nature and secondary when prioritizing the needs and aspirations of communities (Bank). For example, in Cross Rivers State, 53% of all agricultural labour in Nigeria are carried out by women. However, their activities are largely directed at producing food for their households, while those of men tend to be directed at the production of cash crops (Ben, 2015). Women are also often responsible for ensuring the provision of non-monetary essential goods for their households. These essential goods include: the provision of clean portable water, (which often not pipe-borne in most rural communities and they have to travel long distances to provide), fuel for cooking - again in rural areas, is often bio-fuels such as firewood - especially given the exorbitant cost of fossil fuels such as kerosene or butane gas. Provision of regular food staples often derived from their subsistence farming, and fodder for feeding domestic poultry animals which are also often raised for subsistence family feeding.

Shifts in the environment on which they are heavily reliant will result in increased labour and less productivity for them. For instance, the pollution of fresh

water bodies often necessitates that they travel longer distances to fetch potable water as most communities do not have access to pipe-borne water, which in turn means that they will provide lesser amounts for their families in spite of the increase in their labour, resulting in challenges to family hygiene, health, wellbeing and productivity. The stripping of forest land by plantation companies, and the conservation of other forests by the government also means that they do not have sufficient access to firewood, food, and medicinal crops which they would normally forage from the forests lands close to their homes. For the same reason, they will struggle with providing fodder for their domestic poultry and may face violence from these two contenders in the course their quest to provide sustenance for their families. Host communities such as Betem, and Ibogo villages report that their water supply from their rivers have been adversely affected by the land clearing activities of the plantation companies since January 2015 (Friends of the Earth. Environmental Rights Action Nigeria, 2016).

Because of the state government's protectionist stand in support of big time plantations, over the needs of indigent communities, the opportunity costs are often borne by the indigenous communities which are barred from accessing the resources of the forests. At the core of this are women and children, in the light of their roles as explained above. According to the Governor's Forest and Climate Task Force, the state intends to conserve one million hectares of forestland for climate friendly activities within a period of 10 years (Governors' Climate and Forests Task Force, 2017). It states further that this could generate substantial economic value for the state.

The implementation of the REDD in Cross River, on paper is ideal for the conservation of the Earth's rapidly diminishing rain forests, but in reality, the costs for such projects are inordinately borne by indigent, forest dependent communities who are indigenous to these lands. As was succinctly put by Adeniyi Ashiyanbi, of Kings College London, and the School of Oriental and African studies: "...material efforts to secure the forest for REDD+ manifest as forms of carbonised exclusion, in which carbon credentials justify state resource control and a regime of militarised protectionism which curtails local resource access while perpetuating both elite capital accumulation and forest decline" (Lang, 2017).

Access to land

Most occupations in Cross River state are hinged on access to land rights especially as most citizens in the state engage in farming or food processing. With the

competition between conservation and development that the state government is grappling with, as can be expected, local communities are losing valuable land either to plantations, or the state's REDD conservation obligations.

With the exception of lands held under the purview of the Lands Use Act of 1978, ownership of land is vested in the community. Allocation of farmland is to clans and households along patrilineal roots (Eko, 2013). According to a research published by European Centre for Research Training and Development UK, in Cross River state, approximately 79% of men obtain their farmland through patrilineal inheritance, while about 76 % of women have access to farmland through their husbands. Another 13% reported hold farmland through their sons (Eko, 2013). Since they cannot be 'owners', women therefore are not considered 'stakeholders' when negotiations are made for the use of lands or compensations paid for them. The Land Use Act perpetuates this state of affairs, when government 'compensates' 'owners' of lands acquired for public use. The acquisition of communal lands for plantation purposes by the state government on behalf oil palm companies not only took away women's access to livelihoods but also dispossessed them without compensation. As seen through the consultations held with community heads who are all male, female members of communities were not engaged. Compensations received are also shared per family, all of which are patriarchal. Forced acquisition of farmlands often necessitates that families redistribute farmland allocations among its members to accommodate those dispossessed. As the land needs of men are often considered more important than those of women, a woman may lose her previous allotment in such circumstances (Eko, 2013).

Livelihoods

The livelihoods and productivity of women are heavily threatened as can be deduced from the foregoing sections. Within the given socio-cultural context above, without access to land, women are unable to practice subsistence farming, and where they head households, this may jeopardize the nutritional needs of their families. Where they have lost their farm lands to plantations such as Wilmar, their core challenge will be finding other occupations, especially because their chances of finding a job on such plantations are may be slim. While Wilmar claims to have created 5000 new jobs (Business Day, 2014), the population of persons whose livelihoods may have been impacted by Wilmar's activities exceed 20,000 (Friends of the Earth. Environmental Rights Action Nigeria, 2016). Unfortunately, these figures are not desegregated

by gender and therefore do not show how it has impacted women. Plantations need fewer workers than smallholder farms, and are most likely to employ men than women. For the women that have gained employment on Wilmar's plantation, they report that they earn much less than when they managed their own smallholder farmlands (Friends of the Earth. Environmental Rights Action Nigeria, 2016).

Without new skill sets and access to capital, they cannot aspire to other types of employment and cannot access credit because they do not have collateral in the form of landed property. As primary caregivers, the nutritional, health and educational needs of their dependants become compromised and may result in the desperation of these women. In this state of affairs, women are forced to become more dependent on their men folk, and may as a result engage in transactional sex, forced marriage, and/or suffer different forms of gender based violence.

Children

In situations where indigenous households are confronted with unemployment, children may be withdrawn from school and engaged in child labour to help augment their families' resources. In a country such as Nigeria which does not criminalize the withdrawal of children from schools, has the most number of out of school children in the world, and has not been strong in implementing the Child's Rights Act, this situation repeats itself time and again. As noted earlier, their nutritional needs are also in danger of being compromised. In 2016, UNICEF in a news report stated that 2.5 million children across Nigeria were suffering from acute malnutrition (Vanguard News, 2016). Any further compromise of the ability of communities to engage in subsistence farmer could further skew these figures and endanger Nigerian children.

Health and environment

In the competition between forests conservation and plantations, the losers appear to be the indigenous communities. Women in Cross River had previously been able to forage produce such as kola nut from forest trees for sale, and vegetables such as afang and medicinal herbs from the forests in their vicinity for use by their families. However, due to the enforcement of REDD in the state, these activities have been banned and have adversely affected their income and their ability to meet the nutritional needs of their families (World Rainforest Movement, 2016). In reality, it is not these indigenous communities that are a threat to the environment, but big monoculture tree plantations

such as Wilmar. Monoculture plantations, rather than the subsistence farming and foraging done by indigenous communities, disrupt the biodiversity of forests (Osarogiagbon, 2011). It has now been proven that plantations capture only 20% of the carbon that intact natural forests are able to hold (Lang, 2011). The negative impacts of the government's 'development' quest therefore seem to outweigh its benefits.

One of the challenges of the disruption of bio-diversity is the imbalance it brings to the ecosystem and how this adversely impacts human health – in particular, the health of children and their fledgling organs and immunity. While there has been no scientific research on the environmental and health impact of monoculture oil palm plantations in Nigeria, the lessons of similar projects in South-East Asia are instructive. It is documented that at least 25 chemicals – pesticides and herbicides are used by plantation workers in a certain plantation without protective gear and suffered side effects such as nosebleeds, stomach ulcers, etc. In addition, the women who work in plantations were generally less healthy than other women. The women in host communities however reported increases in miscarriages and birth defects related to oil palm pollutions (Bassey, 2016).

Competition and conflicts

When companies like Wilmar employ migrant workers, and fail to make adequate provision for the burden, an additional quick flux of migrant workers will place on their host communities' resources, it results in stiffer competition for already scarce resources. For instance, because of the influx of migrant workers, housing becomes more expensive, as do other commodities and shared public goods, including education for children. Competition for scarce resources in already indigent communities will often result in conflicts.

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Another source of conflicts is when host communities bear the negative impacts of such projects but not its benefit. For instance, while host communities in Akwa Ibom state will bear the environmental and economic consequences of a mono-culture oil palm plantation by Fri-El Green Power, which intends to develop biofuels for electricity in Europe, it does not intend to supply electricity locally (Walker, 2010), hence they will not benefit from its dividends.

Conclusions

From the foregoing, it is evident that the potential negative impacts of oil palm production on women and children in Nigeria potentially outweigh their benefits. It is therefore imperative that the government be circumspect in their policies. In spite of the gloomy prognosis presented above, there are opportunities to develop the local economies of plantation host communities – particularly for women, through state policies and contracts that encourage local supply chains. It will however need the support of state governments and the oil palm tree plantation companies for this to work. Most importantly, to build the capacity of the human resource in the communities. The need to provide compensation to the communities that have suffered the impacts of their activities is also essential. In Cross River's neighbouring state - Akwa Ibom state, the Fri-El Green Power has an 80% stake in their business, while the state government has 20%, with an obligation to transfer 10% to their host community as their equity stake. In this way, the community is able to directly benefit from the dividends of the project. However, the most important policies that the government needs to implement is preventing further negative effects of oil palm plantation by ending further investments and prioritizing the rights and welfare of its quest for economic development.

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