

# Background Review

---



NGOs, CSOs and academia: capacity gaps and advocacy surrounding expansion of oil palm plantations in Nigeria

*Fidelis Allen*

# Background Review

## NGOs, CSOs and academia: capacity gaps and advocacy surrounding expansion of oil palm plantations in Nigeria

**Fidelis Allen**

Associate Professor of Political Science (Development) &  
Acting Director Centre for Conflict and Gender Studies,  
University of Port Harcourt, Choba, Port Harcourt, Nigeria  
Contact: fidelis.allen@uniport.edu.ng

---

### Summary

#### **Issues and impacts on indigenous communities**

- *Host communities to multinational palm oil plantations in Cross River State are concerned about many issues, directly or indirectly shaping human and non-human life negatively. Having acquired thousands of hectares of land in expansion for export and integrated agriculture purposes, with hopes for more, the risk of crowding out smallholder farmers has become an issue. Undermining this population of people in the informal palm oil production workforce deserves proper attention for the purpose of reconciling various interests, such as economic growth aspirations of government, community people and the company in question.*
- *Infractions, land grab, biodiversity loss, deforestation and economic survival (livelihoods) and conflict are serious issues facing communities.*
- *Sustainable palm oil plantation expansion cannot be attained in vertical disregard of local populations' concerns--welfare, food security and peace.*
- *Corporation- driven plantation expansion, in context of government privatization policy, undermine local needs and promote growth at the expense of human security.*
- *Poverty, hunger and food insecurity are part of the discourse on palm oil plantation-related-conflict between local communities on the one hand, and corporations (such as Wilmar and others, in the business in other states of palm oil belt of Nigeria) and government on the other, over what has been termed unfair and illegal concessioning of ancestral land.*

#### **Role of CSOs, CBOs and academics**

- *Campaign activities by non-governmental organizations, working with community leaders, regarding the aforementioned issues, were noticed in both local and international media, and reported by relevant international research institutions in 2012. Petition to Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) by civil society on plantation expansion processes undertaken by Wilmar is a key approach to extracting good behaviour from the company and alerting the world of the danger lurking with associated issues of land grab, biodiversity loss, deforestation and tension in relations between the company and community people. Community antipathy seems more obvious within Cross River State, even though multinational corporations' interest in taken over state palm oil plantations for the purpose of expansion and export, and its undermining of smallholder farming activities, apply to all of Nigeria's 21 states, making up the palm oil belt of the country.*
- *Regular academic inquiry into politicians' policy rhetoric of diversifying the Nigerian economy through large-scale agriculture and its outcome in terms of impact on smallholder farming populations is generally inadequate. Professional local and international non-governmental organizations are making efforts to fill*

this gap through rapid assessment of the situation with palm oil plantation activities in the case of Cross River State, but not with any real success of filling the apparent gap.

- Learning societies in Nigeria, especially those within university and research institutions, are yet to focus substantial attention on the growing importance attached to the palm tree from the perspectives of all stakeholders, including poor peasant communities.
- Non-governmental organizations lack financial resources to engage researchers on a regular basis to conduct cutting-edge analyses to drive advocacy. The real issue is the gap in the social character of most of what passes as research outputs. Those undertaken by non-governmental organizations through hiring of experts, remain grossly insufficient for dealing with the present. Real time analysis is crucial, especially in context of the dynamic nature of human beings, but they are hardly available. At best, the newest of any result of analyses found on the internet dates from 2016, and 80% of all reports produced by NGOs are between 2011 and 2014 periods. This is inadequate for tackling the issues that affect human and non-human life on a regular basis.
- Opportunities for policy advocacy with multinational plantation companies, government, and communities, on best practice and impact of large-scale palm oil business exist but few local non-governmental organizations with real interest and motivation are available.
- Regular research or analysis is a key factor of ensuring proper land-use in context of palm oil plantation expansion in states with corporations undermining smallholder-farming populations.

### **Identified capacity gaps**

- Conventional non-governmental organizations working to support and mobilize groups to demand responsible palm oil plantations are few in Cross River State.
- Community leaders lack adequate advocacy skills to organize.
- Researching social, conflict, economic and ecological problems associated the palm oil business and the role of civil society, community-based organizations and the academia is mainly insufficient.
- Lack of regular and adequate cutting-edge analyses
- Poor utilization of available knowledge on the issues in internal decisions of communities, non-governmental organizations and policy makers.
- Lack of sufficient capacity to conduct rapid field-oriented (theoretical and empirical) assessment of situations by civil society and community-based groups.
- Non-existence of research-civil society coalition or research coalition for knowledge-driven advocacy.
- Lack of research institutions and experts with background in civil society orientations.
- Poor dissemination of the limited knowledge on impacts of palm oil plantation expansion in Cross River State.
- Many research outputs on corporate industrial activities, policy and wellbeing of people and their environment are rather too academic and lacking required taste for civil society work.
- Inappropriate research questions and lack of social character of knowledge produced by researchers.
- Gaps exist when it comes to making research directly beneficial to society through full utilization of outputs and follow-up by civil society organizations, for advocacy and capacity building.
- Poor conceptualization of issues and lack of ideological direction.
- Activities of NGOs and host communities to Wilmar, have not been gender and conflict sensitive enough.
- NGOs and community leaders have brought issues associated with palm oil plantation expansion to public view at local and international fronts but are yet to achieve desired change when it comes to sustainable productions.

### **Recommendations for NGOs, CSOs and academics**

- Create a research coalition with civil society organizations, non-governmental organizations to support advocacy and boost capacity for successful engagement with policy actors.
- Organize regular capacity building meetings for analysis and action on issues.
- Take gender and conflict sensitive positions on issues pertaining to palm oil expansion to reduce inequality between men and women, and avoid physical violence in the struggle for best practices in large-scale agriculture.

## Introduction

This is a background review report on impact of oil palm plantation expansion in the forest landscape of southeast of Nigeria. It focuses on Cross River State, one of 21 palm oil belt states of Nigeria, famous for its unique rich forest. Relying on documentary sources of data, including scholarly papers in journals, baseline reports, books, records of civil society and community-based organizations' conversations, letters of complaints written by their leaders, government gazettes, reports, media publications, this report highlights the role of non-governmental and community-based organizations, the academia and capacity gaps, to date, in tackling the impacts. Furthermore, the report looks at the capacity of these groups and possible gaps with regards to response to issues emanating from expansion of the business, in order to guide broader and field oriented study in the near future.

The upper end is to ascertain and encourage best practices that curtail the undesirable bearings of oil palm production, and boost the most progressive local impacts. Solid evidence from quality research and collaboration in the utilization of results of research for active and proper messages against impacts of oil palm production are part of the longer term or higher goal. The proximate objective, however, is to provide CSOs with evidence and increased capacity that supports their lobbying and advocacy work, by addressing issues relating to the expansion of oil palm plantations.

Tropenbos International's aim in the Green Livelihood Alliance (GLA) programme in Nigeria is to support the emergence of a common vision on alternative, sustainable and climate-smart agro-commodity landscapes, and use of tailored approaches that enable equitable development of oil palm, respect rights and aspirations of local people, and acceptability in terms of fair use of international public goods (Pasicznik and Vellema, 2017). This report has been structured into seven major sections, namely: summary, introduction, context, issues and impact, the role of CSOs, CBOs and academia, capacity gaps, and conclusions.

## Context

The context is crucial. Despite being a branded rentier state, with petroleum as the major component of its economic growth aspirations, majority of Nigerians, especially those in rural communities, take peasant agriculture as main occupation and pastime (Schoneveld 2013). Emergence of petroleum as key

national income and foreign exchange earner for Nigeria has not taken away the agrarian farming culture. Essentially, it is about a timeless culture, running throughout the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial age. Peasant palm oil farming was important for colonial exploitation. On a general note, regarding agriculture, local farmers were conditioned into investing their labour and time into cash crops rather than food, to meet European economic interests. However, European-style plantations of tree cash crops did not appeal to the British colonizers. The colonial government found the peasant economy conducive for achieving its interest in Nigeria. Generally, the colonial state in the entire West Africa, between 1906 and 1939, resisted attempts by multinational corporations hijacking the palm oil business in which peasant production dominated (Meredith, 1984).

The value of large-scale agriculture-driven colonial economy was well acknowledged by the colonial state, but it was not the best option considering the role of the peasant economy to the stability of the state. Establishment of palm oil plantations in Nigeria rather took shape after the colonial era (Schoneveld, 2014). Ironically, the colonial state saw a lot of economic value establishing forest reserves. It was important for the growing timber business. Most forest reserves in Cross River State today, have their origins in the colonial era. The story started changing from the 1950s. In short, it was not until 1954, when, federal constitutional reforms gave regional governments substantial powers in matters of development policy. That signalled the beginning of localization of agricultural policy with attention to be paid to opportunities for palm oil plantations. The compatibility of smallholder farming during the colonial era with the government's interest of meeting needs of the home government with raw materials and cash crops is instructive. Avoiding the problem of land deprivation and conflict associated with plantations was a key consideration in a country where the native authority system was seen as key to the success of the colonial state. The post-colonial state has come with tremendous change with political leaders preaching at random the value of plantation as alternative to petroleum.

One area of interest is palm oil production on large scale. Production at that level requires extensive land use. The smallholder type, which local people is used to and practice as a matter of culture on low scale, is a direct contradiction to plantations. Nigeria's forest landscape is a victim of this rising importance of plantations, in West Africa. In the case of Nigeria,

already more than 90 percent of the country's landscape has been cleared, with Cross River State, as the only state in the country where little of the forest seems to have been left in an atmosphere of growth.

Rivers, Imo, Akwa Ibom, Delta, Abia, Bayelsa, Ondo and Cross River States are key areas in Nigeria with strong local culture of palm oil production. The product is natural for them, different from plantations. Local community people are culturally tied to the palm oil. Every part of the palm tree is useful one way or the other. For example, one part serves as raw material for the production of local soap, which locals cherish. Locals who use it as medicine and for several other purposes cherish the kernel oil. Nearly every part of the palm tree is useful, one-way or the other. For example, local broom for brushing or sweeping is derived from the leaves of the palm tree. Most Nigerian meals contain the oil. The traditional subsistent and low commercially produced oil is seen as special for meals in rural communities for which efforts are usually made to guarantee quality. Locals equally adjudge the local soap derived from the palm fruit highly medicinal for skin diseases. Palm oil plantations in Nigeria, are driven mainly by three major multinational investors: SIAT (Belgium); Fri-El Green Power (Italy), and Wilmar International (Singapore) (Carrere, 2013). Government positive position, raises a number of questions. First, what is the impact of such expansion on local, peasant agriculture based economy with palm oil production as key traditional or cultural practice? The next section looks critically into the issues with expansion of palm oil plantations in Cross River State.

## Issues and impacts on indigenous communities

At the centre of the epic conflict, emerging from new interest in large-scale palm oil production in Cross River State, are activities of Wilmer International, State government, landlord communities and non-governmental organizations. Locals face and feel a strong sense of threat to their economic survival, bordering on smallholdings of natural palm forest landscape. The forest and the land come seriously under threat, when the fact of smallholder farming activities with the natural palm as a means of livelihood or poverty alleviation are framed accordingly (Adebo et al., 2015).

Global demand for palm oil, increased large-scale investment in export-oriented productions, national politicians' effort at reinventing agriculture-driven economic growth with employment creation as toast,

in an age of petroleum price-fluctuation and conflict-ridden industry are issues of concern. Discourses of diversification of economy and alternative sources of growth are fuelling an argument for expansion of agriculture; in err of smallholder farmers who lack capital or resources to compete with the expansive drive of large-corporations, especially multinationals. Cross River State government's concessioning of forest land and palm oil estates to Wilmar, in furtherance of its privatization policy has attracted the anger of locals. Deforestation, biodiversity loss, and exclusion of local smallholder farmers are critical issues, and Allen et al. (2014) identified the following as key issues:

1. Lack of adequate consultation with landlord communities in the concessioning of palm oil plantations. Plantations previously owned by Eastern Nigeria Development Commission (ENDC) were inherited by Cross River State government. Communities expected the government to follow a process that not only fully involve them but addressed their fears and concerns before offering Wilmar International franchise to own the plantations.
2. Violation of government laws or policies.
3. Deforestation and neglect of conservation values.
4. Loss of biodiversity with only little effort at preventing fragmentation of species in their natural habitats.
5. Emerging conflict between landlord communities and civil society organizations on the one hand and Wilmer International and the Cross River State government on the other.
6. Destruction of high conservation areas.

These issues mirror governance deficits. Improper governance of the palm oil industry in age of globalization, with corporations increasingly searching for investment opportunities to expand their landholding is a key defining moment (Sayer et al., 2012). This is happening at the expense of poor locals.

Ibiae, Biase and Caloro palm oil estates belonged to Cross River State government before privatization, with Wilmar as the most recent recipient of franchise. As earlier noted, this state has the richest rainforest region in Nigeria. At the same time, it has the most threatened non-petroleum extractive industry in the country. For example, level of biodiversity loss has been alarming in the last six years. This period marks the start and continuous desire for sale/purchase of hundreds of thousands of hectares of land, for which local communities originally accessed in order to meet food, medicine and several other needs. These are

troubling issues associated with agriculture capitalism, impacting on people and their environment, which have long been recognized as demanding action by government, for which the civil society has to play the role of advocacy.

PZ Cussons has special relationship with Wilmar International in the palm oil business, which has specific significance for plantation expansion, starting from 2010. Having acquired thousands of hectares of land for that purpose, communities are concerned about their survival. The Privatization Council of the state government is the eye of the state government on delivering this franchise to the company. The franchise itself is part of an overall ideological frame and conviction that government has no need to be in business of any guise or type, when the private sector is capable of providing funds needed for investments. The tension generated, and the reality of daily struggle for the return of status quo are clear signs that all is not well with the people.

Deforestation and destruction of High Conservation Value (HCV) areas is an issue occupying the minds of members of the RRDC. At issue is non-compliance with relevant laws, such as the Environmental Impact Assessment law and voluntary codes of conduct, such as the RSPO. One would expect that the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil production is a voluntary organization with a mission of ensuring industry actors observe decorum and avoid destructive practices.

Local groups have accused Wilmar of circumventing laws meant to regulate the industry with the help of state agency actors. A section of the civil society and community-based groups are of the opinion that the company started operations in the communities without undertaking an EIA. It received certificate of clearance from the state Ministry of Environment even before any form of EIA was conducted. Nigeria's EIA is meant to protect environmental impact of development activities on people and their environment. There are also forestry laws, and numerous similar ones, which can be deployed to check flight from standards.

Issues point clearly to extractive industry development crisis, of the needs it ought to serve. Whether those of traditional smallholder farming populations or export needs with big-time investors as major beneficiaries. Excluding those without capital from mainstream palm oil business will be a key issue with growth of the sector at industrial levels. Table 1: Land acquired controversially by Wilmar International in Cross River State. In Ibiae, 5,483 hectares are threatened, 5,561 hectares in Calaro and 8,688 in Kwa Falls, from deforestation, national park encroachment;

biodiversity loss; livelihoods; access to forest and land. Impact are in diverse forms. Nevertheless, there are policy measures to address them. In many producing countries, local and export-oriented productions face a lot of challenges. The challenges, in many parts of the world, including Nigeria, are providing lessons for those with or without such measures. The origin of the oil palm is usually traced to West Africa, but today, more than 43 countries across the tropics are involved in production, with Malaysia and Indonesia being the largest producers.

Biodiversity loss is a key consequence of palm oil plantation expansion. In this, the rainforest of Cross River State, presence of birds, the great apes, and several other remaining species of life in the state have come under severe threat. It comes with prospects of widespread establishment of palm oil plantations (Wich et al., 2015). Biological realities have become fragmented into isolated areas. Natural habitats have been tangled with almost no easy way to redeem the situation outside prevention. Reasons include disruption of natural habitats are hardly recoverable, alongside an increase in plantations and productivity. As Yaap et al. (2010) have argued "it is unlikely that oil palm management practices could be improved enough to significantly increase biodiversity value of plantations." The extent to which biological communities can be secured in a highly limited current atmosphere of market demand from Europe's biodiesel craze in the coming years is difficult.

Smallholder palm oil production is age-long, and has never constituted an issue, on a scale of mass community anger and discontentment. Review of the empirical and theoretical literature yields key results of insight into the nature and impact of the palm oil business on local communities and their peasant economies. Decades prior to formal colonization of the entire West African region where the crop is popularly believed to have originated. But even the colonial state under the British Secretary of States for Colonies and the colonial government in Nigeria, saw the danger of encouraging expansion of plantations in the palm oil industry. To be sure, foreign investors made several efforts to no avail as the government was rather tenacious on its conviction that the social stability of the colonial economy depended on a thriving smallholder agriculture.

## Role of CSOs, CBOs and academia

Non-governmental organizations and community leaders in Cross River State, made their initial formal reaction to Wilmar's plan of plantation expansion in 2012. Prior (2011), the company had registered its

Biase Plantations Limited, as a subsidiary, within its African investment portfolio and purchased franchise to start business. Rainforest Resource and Development Centre (RRDC), a local NGO along with other groups, with petitioned the company to the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) in February 2012. The issue was, as now, about the way the company purchased the franchise without proper consultation with the landlord communities. It was also about land grab and its implications for the survival of local people. By that initial complaint, a door for organizing with non-governmental organizations providing a voice for local leaders was opened. A process of response by the company and counter response started.

Meanwhile, regular research has been acknowledged as key to any effort at promoting proper land-use policy with government, corporations, and communities in context of palm oil agriculture. The role of researchers in reconciling existing conflicting interests of expansion of the industry and those of biodiversity and socio-economic interests of communities have been noted (Wich et al., 2014). In this case, local and international non-governmental organizations working with local groups have made initial efforts at making their campaigns research-driven. But this remains fundamentally rudimentary. The reasons are not far from the fact that local non-governmental organizations lack in-house research capacity for conducting proper research. Besides, the value-oriented nature of NGOs demands activist researchers or those with capacity for cutting-edge analyses that are relevant for advocacy. Often, NGOs adopt the rapid research approach with little or no attention given to rigor. On the other hand, often the researchers they hire are not fully seen as authors of the work they produce. Instead, non-governmental organizations that were never part of such research beyond assisting in field data collection take the benefit of authorship of the reports that are eventually produced. This state of affairs is counter-productive. Often, the net results include, a sense of personal loss for such academics, whose prime motivations have to include satisfaction from being an author of a report published accordingly. In any case, as yet, scholars and researchers are not visible enough with analysis to help advocacy, policy-making, implementation and monitoring around threats posed by palm oil plantation expansion in Nigeria.

On 7 October 2015, Environmental Rights Action facilitated a meeting of community people and leaders of local non-governmental organizations in Cross River State. Apart from the opportunity it provided for analysis and capacity building, participants

discussed the impact of palm oil plantation expansion. The communiqué issued at the end of the meeting spoke glowingly about the perspectives of community people. One of the issues in the analysis that emanated in course of the discussions was the fact that Wilmar, at its beginning of business in Cross River State, signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the host communities (including Betem, Ehom, Akpet and Idoma, all in Biase Local Government Area). Promises of contribution to the development of the communities, through provision of social amenities such as roads and potable water have not been made good (ERA, 2015).

ERA works with local people struggling for land rights and access to resources with the state government and the company in question. What is critical for the landlord communities is the way the land which they have had long-standing, ancestral claim of ownership to was acquired without proper consultation. And even long after purchases, meaningful effort at recognizing them as stakeholders and vulnerable groups in the business has not been sufficiently demonstrated. Best practice is a key aspect of what is being demanded of Wilmer International and the state government for which ERA and Rainforest Resource and Development Centre (RRDC) collaborate to support local communities to be able to make these demands on relevant authorities.

Concerns continue to mount. Initial efforts at understanding the issues were made by Environmental Rights Action /Friends of the Earth Nigeria) through joint planning with local groups and by engaging the author as consultant to investigate tension between local communities on the one hand and the government and the company in question on the other in 2014. The effort yielded good results, which informed advocacy and initial capacity building for the local civil society.

In November 2012, the executive director of Rainforest Resource and Development Centre (RRDC), Mr Odey Oyama, had submitted a letter of grievance to the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil production. The RSPO was established as a voluntary mechanism for ensuring sustainable palm oil production. Members cut across a range of stakeholders including producers, bankers etc. It has developed principles to guide activities of producers in the sector. He raised five allegations against Wilmar International, namely: (i) unlawful acquisition of land for the purpose of palm oil plantation, (ii) non-compliance with local laws and regulations, (iii) lack of transparency in operations, (iv) lack of accountability with migrant communities, and (v) lack of agreement with communities.

These allegations form a critical component of community agitations for land rights, access to environment and poor community consultation against expansion of palm oil plantations. The RRDC is a local non-governmental organization, working with community leaders. The NGO is active in articulating grievances of communities for the purpose of advocacy. Clearly, the local civil society, including community-based organizations has helped to bring the issues to limelight, which is an advantage on its own.

In a similar vein, RRDC, wrote on 11 February 2016 to the Conservator General of National Parks Services in Abuja, asking the office to take action against Wilmar for encroachment into Cross River State National Park. This complaint was extended to the Minister of Environment in a letter addressed to him on 25 July 2016. The latest letter written by the NGO to the secretariat of the European Union (January 2017) express worry and action by the Union over its recent policy on biofuels. The implications of such a policy for poverty escalation and environmental despoliation were sounded in the letter. All this, suggest a particular approach for engaging government and other stakeholders in the struggle for sustainable palm oil industry. Cutting-edge analysis, from the side of the academia and researchers is yet to make significant impact in the handling of the issues. In any case, studies that are directly relevant or sought for the purpose of advocacy are limited.

The aforementioned allegations point seriously to threats to community peoples access to livelihoods. The natural palm tree, which is common and remains the cornerstone of peasant agricultural practice among communities in Cross River State is pivotal. The literature, including those produced by non-governmental organizations, acknowledges the negative impact of expansion of palm oil plantation on local people and at the same time give the impression that it is in the interest of the country or state, as the case may be for the government to industrialize the palm oil sector. They give the impression that such expansion is in the interest of development and economic growth. By logical extension, these problems are secondary to economic growth. This conclusion takes full departure from arguments that any economic growth aspiration or development model that fails to take into consideration the interest of the poor, inequality, and consultation with citizen groups is guilty of negligence. The palm oil industry has come directly under the influence of international capitalism, which some have tagged risky for any aspiration of poverty reduction and taming of inequality among rural dwellers in Nigeria (Ayokhai and Naankiel,

2016). The review links civil society, including learning societies and research institutions, with a crucial role in mitigating biodiversity or environmental impact of palm oil development (e.g. Yaap et al., 2010).

There are challenges in the way. First, the social basis of research, which ought to be in the sub-conscious mind of every researcher is mainly lacking. The civil society has to be knowledge-driven, to be able to make real impact. This is not the case, especially, in an age, when research can also become an ideological tool in the hands of powerful groups in society. Academia is yet to play a significant role in ensuring responsible palm oil production in Nigeria. The knowledge driven industry which many eulogize today means socially relevant community of knowledge producers untainted by anti-people ideological issues. The reality, is that business, especially big business as with the case of palm oil plantations, is mostly driven by capitalist interest. Community people, who are mostly farmers, belong to the group without capital. The land is the most important resource they have. Analysis of the issues, have two dimensions, narratives of legitimization on the basis of elite interest and rhetoric of development and economic growth. The second, mostly beneficial to civil society and community groups struggling for justice, emanated mostly from non-governmental organizations, whose works have consistently been suspected by governmental leaders.

In a 2014 policy brief written by Budidarsono, Sirait and Pradhan for the World Agroforestry Centre, it was argued that growing trend of expansion of palm oil plantations needed understanding from research, behaviour of all actors in the business, including smallholder farmers of the product. In the case of Nigeria, the role of the academia, as yet, is marginal. Knowledge has a social character. Its production and utilization are important elements in any development process. Review of the literature shows a section with vigorous but value-laden viewpoints which politicians hardly incline to read and adopt for policy. Yet, the question and the fears of what the industry would do to local farming populations and their forests remain less attractive to scholars. The literature--empirical and theoretical literature- is not only scanty on the impact of expansion of plantations on communities and environment, it fails to capture meaningfully whatever modest role the civil society, community groups and academia are playing concerning the problem.

The impact of large-scale production of palm oil on local populations and their environment has received only modest academic attention. Efforts in this regard may broadly be categorized into the development



discourse, where agriculture is mostly seen in terms of means to an alternative political economy. Scholarly and grey literature reviewed in this study reveal that the role of academia in understanding the impact of palm oil expansion is marginal.

## Capacity gaps

Conventional NGOs working to support and mobilize groups to demand responsible palm oil plantations are few in Cross River State. Participant observation during a capacity training programme, organized by Environmental Rights Action with representatives of NGOs and community leaders in Cross River State, in 2015, revealed gaps with the civil society.

First, is community leaders' lack of advocacy skills to organize. This is an important point to note, if we acknowledge the fact that ultimately, they should drive whatever change that they need when it comes to the impact of palm oil agriculture expansion. They are directly affected and so need to be equipped to directly engage relevant authorities on the issues that affect them. Civil society organizations therefore should look in this direction to assist community leaders sufficiently in a way that supports performance and good results. Researching social, conflict, economic and ecological problems associated with the palm business and civil society in these matters in Nigeria is mainly insufficient. Meanwhile, a growing conviction about the relevance of knowledge-production in the success of civil society, continues to compel a need for communities struggling to be heard regarding these issues, to be guided with relevant information or empirical analysis. Results of such analyses are needed to guide decisions and content of campaigns.

In other words, regular and adequate cutting-edge analyses are crucial. As yet, they are hardly available to support advocacy. But even more serious is the challenge of effective utilization of the limited available knowledge on the part of communities, non-governmental organizations and policy makers. In some cases, making sense of the knowledge is even a bigger issue within civil society, government, and industry governance systems. The point is that, capacity is needed. Civil society organizations lack sufficient capacity to conduct rapid field-oriented (theoretical and empirical) assessment of situations. In several other cases, research reports are produced without consistent and robust plans of outlets for dissemination and advocacy. Establishing a strong research civil society might help to fill this gap.

In addition, many research outputs on corporate industrial activities, policy and wellbeing of people

and their environment are rather too academic and lacking required taste for civil society work. Whereas, appropriate questions, the research process, findings and dissemination are all important, adequate plans on socializing research outputs is hardly part of the analyses. In other words, gaps exist when it comes to making research directly beneficial to society through full utilization by civil society organizations, for advocacy and capacity building. The other leg, is poor conceptualization of these processes in light of specific areas of problems in Nigeria by many professional learning societies who have continued to deny civil society groups the opportunity for a more knowledge-oriented advocacy for social change. These are serious issues underlining the importance of a coalition of research civil society that can complement or be part of civil society groups.

In light of growing interest of government and corporations in palm oil plantations in Nigeria and the implications this has for the forest, biodiversity, livelihoods, and rights of communities, such a research coalition can serve important functions, including the opportunity to mainstream knowledge production in civil society advocacy. Large-scale, export-oriented palm oil production, being driven, in near complete disregard for local community access to resources, inequality, poverty, livelihoods, has to be given due attention in terms of best practice. The lack of a research arm of civil society in the form of a network with local and international relevance is a gap that needs to be filled. As obsession with natural resource-driven economic growth continues, creative exploration of what works and what does not depend on productive relationship among policy actors. Policy makers and politicians tend to be less involved in determining what works and what does not, suggesting that other components of the policy community, such as the civil society, has to be available to have the capacity and resources to play this role. So far, this role has been inadequate with the case of achieving sustainable production of palm oil in Cross River State. It means the civil society needs to also arm itself with a research wing with capacity to support evidence-based engagement with policy makers and corporations.

Activities of NGOs and host communities to Wilmar have not been sufficiently gender and conflict sensitive. For example, among some of the landlord communities, internal migration has been an issue. The issue of settler/native relationship, where those regarded as migrants have no voice in the struggle for sustainable palm oil development is destructive and not developmental. Those who because their ancestors migrated to where they are now, centuries

ago, are wrongly seen as visitors or strangers without rights to land. Meanwhile, these are people who do not know any other place to call home. They suffer double tragedy of denial of access to land thousands of hectares of land acquired by Wilmar and aggression from fellow community people who see them as strangers. This situation does not work well for successful collective struggles for change. Also, it means communities are not conflict sensitive. The other leg is the lack of sufficient gender sensitivity. Traditional governance and decision-making processes; and local social movement activities remain mainly gender insensitive because of entrenched patriarchy. Specifically, framing the issues around expansion of palm oil agriculture in Cross River State in terms of gender, deserves better attention.

Regular insights into dynamics of the extractive sector development, in context of facts of human nature and history, benefits the choice of methodology for engagements. This is not the case when it comes to assessing relationships among actors in policy and production systems. Attention has to be given to this. In addition, existing vulnerability of community leaders to manipulation and control by local political elites and corporations in matters that border on their collective economic, social and environmental health, deserve attention. The risk of inaction and what that means for avoiding betrayal of future generations is in part a function of boldness to speak truth to power and refusing to be co-opted in the wrong direction on these issues. This gap needs to be filled, through more participation of groups, including regular analysis by scholars or researchers. Democratization of civil society involvement in the management of the palm oil business in Nigeria with all actors in the policy community making contributions will produce better outcome. In the meantime, the natural resource curse theory seems closest to explaining gaps associated with the entire extractive sector in Nigeria. Civil society

and researchers can provide useful platforms for offering indicators of this theory and suggest actions to deal with it, as with palm oil production.

## Conclusions and recommendations

Undeniably, community leaders in places where Wilmar has acquired extensive land for large-scale plantations, have played significant roles in calling the attention of local, national and international community to issues associated with the industry. Professional non-governmental organizations, as well as the academia have also made interesting efforts at undertaking advocacy to the state government and oil companies. The review highlights the key issues with expansion of palm oil plantations by multinational Wilmar International, in the case of Cross River State. Loss of biodiversity, violation of relevant legislations and procedures, as well as loss of livelihoods are critical. Meanwhile, non-governmental leaders and community leaders are struggling to make their voices heard on these issues. Furthermore, it notes the importance of the palm oil expansion programme of government and observes the limited role academics have played when it comes to response by civil society and community-based organizations.

Recommendations for NGOs, CSOs and academics, include the creation of a research coalition with civil society organizations, non-governmental organizations to support for the purpose of advocacy and their boosting capacity for successful engagement of policy actors. There is also a need to organize regular capacity building meetings for analysis and action on issues, and we need to take gender and conflict sensitive positions on issues pertaining to palm oil expansion to reduce inequality between men and women, as well as avoid physical violence in the struggle for best practices in the large-scale agriculture sector.

## References

- Allen F, Ojo G, Karikpo M, 2014. Large-scale palm oil production, environment and livelihood of local communities in Nigeria: the case of Wilmar plantations in Cross River State. Environmental Rights Action/ Friends of the Earth Nigeria.
- Adebo GM, Ayodele OJ, Olowokere K, 2015. Palm oil production as a poverty alleviation strategy among small-scale farmers in Ekiti State, Nigeria. *World Journal of Agriculture Research*, 3(2):43-48.
- Ajalla JNE, 2011. Ethnographic study of oil palm procedure in Akampka Local Government Area of Cross River State. *International Journal of Research in Arts and Social Sciences*, 3.
- Ayokhai FEF and Naankiel PW, 2016. Towards resolving Nigeria's development crisis: a historical diagnosis of the oil palm industry. *International Journal of Asian Social Sciences*, 6(9):537-551.
- Carrere R, 2013. Oil palm Africa, past, present and future scenarios, *World Forest Moment Series on Tree Plantations*, No.15.

- Budidarsono S, Sirait M, Pradhan U, 2014. A new trend in palm oil production in the context of changing global demands: a portrayal of oil palm development in Riau Province, Sumatra, Indonesia. Brief No. 43, World Agroforestry Centre.
- Federal Government of Nigeria, National Park Service Act, CAP N65, LFN 2004.
- Friends of the Earth US and Environmental Rights Action. 2015. Exploitation and Empty Promises, Wilmar Nigeria Land Grab. Research Report. Friends of the Earth US and Environmental Rights Action
- Grain, 2013. Stolen land: Nigerian villagers want their land back from Wilmar. Grain, December.
- Gupta R, Sykem T, 2013. Nigeria Palm Industry Report. [www.businessdayonline.com/wp](http://www.businessdayonline.com/wp).
- Hinds AE, 1997. Government policy and the Nigerian palm oil export industry, 1939-49. *The Journal of African History*, 38(3):459-478.
- Oyama O, 2016. Letter of complaint to Nigeria's Minister of Environment, RRDC News Bulletin, 002.
- Oyama O, 2016. Letter of complaint to Conservator General, National Park Service Abuja, 11 February 2016.
- Oyama, O. 2017. Letter of complaint to the European Union, January 2017
- Pasiecznik N, Vellema H, 2017. Oil palm plantations in forest landscapes in Nigeria – assessing impacts, improving outcomes and suggesting alternatives. Phase 1 – Background review, to initiate multi-phase research, capacity building opportunities. Tropenbos International, Wageningen, the Netherlands.
- Schoneveld GC, 2013. Farmland investments in sub-Saharan Africa. A comparative analysis of the challenges for sustainability. Eburon, Delft, the Netherlands.
- Schoneveld GC, 2014. The politics of the forest frontier: negotiating between conservation, development, and indigenous rights in Cross River State, Nigeria. *Land Use Policy*, 38: 147-162.
- Tiku NE, Bulletin FA, 2015. Oil palm marketing, Nigeria-lessons to learn from Malaysia experience, opportunities, and foreign direct investment in Cross River State. *Journal of Development and Agricultural Economics*, 7(7):243-252.
- Ugwu E, 2008. Nigeria: Italian firm takes over Abia Palm Company. *This Day*, 23 September 2008.
- Wich SA, Garcia-Ulla J, Kuhl HS, Humble TJS, Koh LP, 2014. Will oil palm's homecoming spell doom for Africa's great ape? *Current Biology* 24(14):1659-1663.
- Yaap B, Struebig MJ, Paoli G, Koh LP, 2010. Mitigating the Biodiversity Impacts of Oil Palm Development. CAB International, 5:019.