
Nigeria: Michelin's rubber plantations destroyed women's livelihoods

"I don't want money. I want my land back...if they give me one million Naira [the local currency] today, I will still go broke, but if I have my land I can always farm to take care of my family and possibly pass the land on to my children."(Woman from Iguoriakhi)

The France-based transnational company Michelin, one of the major players in world tyre production, has quite recently established rubber plantations in Nigeria.

It all started on May 29, 2007, when over 3,500 hectares of Iguobazuwa Forest Reserve -including individual and communal farmlands- were allotted to Michelin to be converted into rubber plantations in an illegal deal without the consent of community people or proper Environmental Impact Assessment.

Iguobazuwa is home to a population of more than 20,000 agrarian people, 85% of whom depend on the dense forest for their daily livelihoods. The forest is rich in biodiversity, including animals such as monkeys, antelope, grasscutter, tortoise, snails and birds. Iguobazuwa was also a place where food crops were produced like cassava, yam, plantain, pineapple, melon, corn and vegetables, whether edible or medicinal.

Communities surrounding the Iguobazuwa forest include Aifesoba, Iguoriakhi, Igueihase, Ora, Amienghomwan, Ugbokun, Obaretin, Obosogbe, Okoro and Iguobazuwa. Although the forest land legally belongs to the Government, in 1972 communities were granted rights over it, with some parts of those forests allocated rotationally to members of the community for use as farmlands.

In December 2007, Michelin bulldozed the 3,500 hectares of forests as well as the people's farmlands, leaving the affected community people uncompensated. Local people found themselves from one day to another with both sources of livelihood –their forest and farmlands- completely destroyed. Iguobazuwa communities lost everything.

In May 2008, the company started planting the rubber trees. Although the trees are still at an early stage, as the experience in many other countries shows, communities will have to also face the additional impacts resulting from the plantations themselves.

"Two years after my husband's death, I started farming... Michelin came with his evil bulldozer and destroyed everything I had planted. I was crying...I was trying to stop them; they threatened to bulldoze me with their caterpillar if I don't allow them."

Farmer women now jobless...

The unholy arrival of Michelin to Iguobazuwa forest after over 300 years of peaceful co-existence among communities has brought nothing but hunger, malnutrition, diseases, poverty, air and water

pollution, soil erosion, social dislocation, increase in social vices, alteration of age-old traditional practices, lack of fuel wood and bush meat.

Their destroyed farms had produced a number of diverse food crops:

I had two acres of farmland in which I planted cassava, plantains, pineapples, cocoyam, pepper, and pineapples. Now, the farm is gone and I couldn't have any source of food or livelihood anymore'.
(Woman from Aifesoba village)

The majority of the women who shared their experiences said that usually the man prepares the farmland for planting and the woman takes care of all the other activities from cultivation to harvesting. So it is women who use the land for cultivation of crops. Now that they find their farmlands destroyed women have become farm labourers in other farms in nearby forests or villages yet to be affected by the rampaging Michelin; while others have been rendered jobless, and hungry.

Michelin has destroyed our farmlands. I feel pained by their actions. The farms used to provide food for our families. I used to assist in paying my children's school fees. We want them to pay for our crops and farmlands. They should leave our lands for us. We want our land back. Our lives depend on it. Now we are jobless. No more bitter leaves, water leaves and pumpkin leaves. My husband has been jobless for years; we can't afford to depend on our husbands for everything. We want Michelin to compensate us...the value is too much to ignore. (Woman from Aifesoba community)

... and pennyless

Usually women got the money from what they sell from the farm produce at the local market. Hence, the robbery of their farms have greatly affected the women folk as a lot of the responsibilities for family upkeep rest on the women, so they have no other choice than to resort to menial jobs in order to survive.

Aren't these people sending us to go and steal?' They took away my four acre land and the source of livelihood for my family. They drove me away from the farm while I was still working, without any explanation or compensation. My husband lost his job as a driver in the city and I have four children, all of whom are now out of school for lack of school fees. (Woman from Aifesoba community)

The majority of the women now engage in small scale subsistence farming within their compounds. Some buy cassava crops from those who have, and process them for sale when they mature.

Caretaker women in trouble

Apart from being in charge of water uses for domestic activities, clothing provision and collection of seeds and fruits, women are responsible of collecting medicinal plants that are vital in local communities' traditional practices linked to health. The disappearance of the forests has caused that now women must go far away -with the shortest distance of about 15km apart- to get herbs to treat some ailments.

I am pregnant and ill, and the herbs are nowhere to be found. Before now, we used to go to the bush

to get herbs to cure all sorts of ailments. You know there are some ailments that orthodox medicines cannot cure; but now we cannot access them because Michelin has bulldozed our forests. You can see that my legs and limbs are swollen; unlike before when I get pregnant, I cannot get those very effective herbs for my condition anymore. (Heavily pregnant woman from Aifesoba)

As a woman from Iguoriakhi says:

We just know that Michelin is doing the damage. They are the people we are seeing. In the past we fed from the forest; our life depended on the forest. There are a lot of people in my community that do not know where hospitals are, because the forest provides their medicinal needs..

An 83 year old woman from Iguobazuwa community explains the situation as follows:

I have lived in Iguobazuwa for 65 years. I used to go to the forest to pluck some medicinal herbs to treat my children whenever they fall ill. It was from the forest I got medicinal leaves to treat myself all through the years of my several times of pregnancy.

Women standing up for their rights

Women know that nothing good for them has or will result from the activities of Michelin in their area. They are starting to organize themselves and are looking for support. They want their lands back, their trees planted again and also to be fully compensated for the destroyed crops.

They are decided to carry out actions, protest marches, and demonstrations to Michelin Nigeria to enforce their demands in resisting all forms of large scale tree plantations in their territories.

“If I have my way, I would stop them from buying our lands for rubber plantation...If I have my way, I would uproot the whole rubber plantation with my hands... They should leave our land for us.”

For that, they need to overcome some problems. As a woman from Iguobazuwa community says:

In the past, we used to have a women group, but now, it no longer exist. That is one of the reasons why we have not been able to confront them as a group. No unity, no resistance!

Traditionally, Iguobazuwa women have not participated in any form of resistance, until recently when some community women and some men from Aifesoba and Obosogbe communities engaged in a protest march in Benin city to denounce the activities of Michelin in their locality.

More recently, women have become more assertive to know and exercise their rights, the value of their forest and how to become more active in the decision making process as it relates to good forest management practices in their localities.

In Aifesoba community, the women -in the company of men- engaged in a protest march to the forest area where Michelin's trucks and bulldozers were busy felling trees. They stopped them from working on two occasions; on the third time Michelin got mobile police men to guard them and to intimidate and scare the community people away. As a result, some women from other communities are now scared of taking any move to confront Michelin as they are afraid of being maltreated, intimidated or harassed the way Aifesoba community people were treated.

As a fallout from the 2-day workshop held on the 4th -5th November 2008, Michelin called some members of two communities (Aifesoba, and Iguobazuwa) out of the nine communities directly impacted, and payed them compensation. One group from Iguobazuwa was paid fully while the other community from Aifesoba was payed what the community people described as peanuts, as according to them, it was a far cry from the extent of destruction and was not commensurate with the amount valued for the crops destroyed.

At the end of the workshop the women released a communiqué in which they demanded a series of urgent actions. Among them, they demanded that the current Edo State Government should review the sale of Iguobazuwa forest reserve, that Michelin Nigeria should return their lands to them and replant every tree fell, with full compensation for crops destroyed, and that the invasion of their forests by Michelin Nigeria should not be seen as a sign of development, but of impoverishment, as their lives and livelihoods have been jeopardized and that further expansion into their lands at Iguobazuwa MUST STOP.

But the most important thing is their determination to get their lands back.