
The unequal and perverse exchange between Nigeria and colonialist corporate powers: from fossil fuels to industrial oil palm plantations and REDD

Fossil fuels began to replace wood as an energy source in England in the 18th Century, a switch that went hand-in-hand with the so-called “industrial revolution”. Consumption of fossil fuels was extensive already then and its implications were huge, not only in England but also far away, in Nigeria, Africa. There is a direct link between the increasing use of fossil fuel in that period, mainly coal to produce steam, with the fact that West Africa became a century later the global center of the palm oil industry.

In the 19th century, British merchants in search of business opportunities along the African coast were able to take advantage of the steam engine to become independent of wind and currents. With the steam engine, they got upriver in the Niger delta where the sailboats could not. At the same time, they found out that the palm oil that was very common in West Africa was a useful and even essential grease for the wheels of the steam engine as otherwise they would not be able to withstand the pressure and break. In spite of the resistance they faced from the coastal Nigerian merchants and chiefs, the British got considerable advantage compared with these merchants and chiefs who until then had controlled palm oil prices. By travelling up-river, the British also discovered that there was coal and other materials and goods to obtain. This motivated the colonizers to invest in a railroad system to bring these materials and goods to the coast. Besides palm oil, also coal mines started to feed England’s steam boats, trains and economy. (1)

Until the first half of the 20th century, West Africa was the main global producer of palm oil, with Nigeria the main producer country. At the same time as Indonesia and Malaysia overtook Nigeria as the world’s largest producers of palm oil, in the 1960s, British-Dutch multinational Shell began large-scale exploitation of oil in the Niger Delta. The oil industry became both the largest industry of Nigeria and the most destructive to the communities of the Niger Delta that depend primarily on the forests, mangroves, rivers and estuaries for their farming and fishing livelihoods. The resistance struggles of the communities have been numerous and faced violence and oppression (see editorial about the struggle of Ken Saro-Wiwa). The devastating impacts have been increasingly recognized at the international level. UNEP (United Nations Environmental Program) for example investigated the environmental and public health impacts of the oil extraction with a focus on Ogoniland in 2011, at the request of the Nigeria government. Ogoni is a main area of oil extraction in the Niger Delta. The UN report found that “oil contamination in Ogoniland is widespread and severely impacting many components of the environment” and “the Ogoni people live with this pollution every day” (2).

Many transnational oil corporations, especially Shell, have made huge profits at the expense of the

Nigerian people, and particularly the Ogoni. In January 2013, a Dutch court ruled that Shell should clean up oil pollution in Ikot Ada Udo, compensate those affected and prevent further leaks from occurring. (3) It was a unique case where for the first time a Dutch multinational company had to stand trial in a Dutch court for the acts of one of its subsidiaries, Shell Nigeria operating outside the Netherlands. But many other communities are waiting for such a decision that acknowledges Shell's responsibility for the devastation caused by the oil extraction and requires the company to pay at least for the clean-up given that many areas have been so devastated that restoration will be a process to take centuries if not more. For example, the villages of Oruma and Goi that suffer from exactly the same environmental destruction as the people in Ikot Ada Udo, but the court did not hold Shell liable in their cases. The Nigerian farmers and FOE-Netherlands announced they will appeal against this decision. (3) Meanwhile, Shell and other corporations continue to claim that responsibility for many oil spills is with the perpetrators of sabotage and theft. However, a recent Amnesty International report, based on six months of field study, confirmed that there is "no legitimate basis" for the company's argument that most of the spills are caused by sabotage or theft. Moreover, Amnesty argues that if spills take place, "securing oil infrastructure against such acts is - to a substantial extent - the responsibility of the operator." (4).

While oil production continues, industrial oil palm plantations are expanding again in the country, an expansion spurred again, in an indirect way, by fossil fuels, basically because of the search for alternatives to these fuels by Northern countries while aiming to maintain their centralized and huge energy consumption. One of these alternatives are agrofuels and palm oil, the cheapest vegetable oil available now on the world market, which has been identified as a key 'raw material' for the increasing demand for vegetable oils in the EU because of mandatory targets for "renewable energy" use by 2020. Companies from Asia, but also Europe and the USA have been grabbing land in Nigeria and in Africa for industrial oil palm plantations, plans and projects covering more than 4 million hectares have been announced by mid-2013.

In Nigeria, the main area of investment is Cross River State, in the Southeast, where the last remaining tropical forest area of Nigeria is located. It is there that the biggest palm oil company in the world, Wilmar - a Singapore-USA owned company - started some years ago to expand oil palm plantations on the lands of the Ibiae indigenous communities. The first area acquired by Wilmar, through its subsidiary Biase Plantations, is 5,5 thousand hectares, of which 3 thousand hectares is forest land while the remaining area are old oil palm plantations that are being replanted. The Calabar-based NGO RRDC has shown how this privatisation of land previously held by the state has resulted in human rights violations, environmental destruction, and the violation of municipal and federal laws and legislations, none of which has prevented the company from claiming its planting is adhering to RSPO principles and criteria. The new trend of increasing large-scale oil palm plantations by RSPO member Wilmar poses a particular threat to the future and survival of the indigenous Ibiae community. And Wilmar tends to expand more and more, with tens of thousands of hectares of oil palm plantations encroaching on forest and community land, as is happening in other African countries where Wilmar and other corporations are also expanding their oil palm plantations (5).

This rapid expansion of industrial plantations in Cross River State and neighbouring regions and countries brought representatives of organizations from Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Benin, Ivory Coast, Cameroon, DRC and Gabon, as well as from Indonesia, Europe and the Americas, together in Calabar, Cross River State, to discuss this trend of expanding industrial oil palm plantations on the African continent and discuss common plans and activities. During four days of activities - 2-5 November 2013 - , they shared experiences, analysed the situation on the continent as well as learning from what came of the promises oil palm companies made when they established plantations in Indonesia, the main producer of palm oil worldwide. The participants reaffirmed the

commitment to join efforts to halt the ongoing industrial oil palm monoculture expansion and continue the struggle to defend peoples' territories and economies. A declaration from the meeting was produced and can be accessed at <http://wrm.org.uy/meetings-and-events/calabar-declaration/>

Alongside oil palm expansion REDD+ projects are also threatening to encroach community land in Cross River State. These projects are being set up by the state and federal government as part of a so-called pilot programme on REDD, financed by UN agencies, through the UNREDD programme. Communities living in the forest areas targeted for these projects complain that they are not being informed, while their traditional activities are put at risk, based on what is happening in numerous other REDD+ projects around the world where communities lose control over their territories.

This brief overview shows a story of an unequal exchange, of “products” – palm oil, coal, oil, palm oil again, and most recently the invented commodity called “carbon credits”. They all play a role in an historical process of profit-driven plundering by British, Dutch and other corporate interests of energy and other natural “resources” in Nigeria, aiming to increase corporate profits while creating more and more demands for an industrialized production and consumption model based on unsustainable use of fossil fuels. What makes the latest twists of the story even more perverse is the fact that while initially, Nigeria was merely a source of cheap fuel and energy for the European, especially the British industry, the forests and mangroves that survived the devastation from oil and oil palm extraction are appropriated to help “solve” the climate crisis that has resulted from this massive burning throughout the past two centuries of fossil fuels coal, oil and gas. The perversity lies in the fact that these supposedly carbon/saving REDD and tree planting projects are not solving this crisis, because they are false solutions. In addition to creating the illusion that the climate crisis is being tackled when in fact emissions are just moved from one place to another (6). They are creating more problems to the Nigerian people, as one more ingredient in a story of multiple violations in the course of extracting energy.

Sources: (1) based on a presentation of Andreas Malm from Lund University, Sweden, during EJOLT (www.ejolt.org) workshop in Nigeria, March 2013; (2) http://postconflict.unep.ch/publications/OEA/UNEP_OEA_ES.pdf; (3) <http://wrm.org.uy/articles-from-the-wrm-bulletin/section2/nigeria-dutch-court-condemns-shell-but-more-justice-is-needed/>; (4) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-24839324>; (5) http://wrm.org.uy/books-and-briefings/oil_palm_in_africa/; (6) <http://wrm.org.uy/books-and-briefings/10-things-communities-should-know-about-redd/>