Nigeria: Okomu Oil Palm Company – destroying communities for oil palm expansion

Okomu Oil Palm, which operates in the palm oil as well as rubber production business, was established in 1976 as a Federal Government of Nigeria pilot project covering an area of 15,580 hectares out of which 12,500 hectares could be planted with oil palm. In 1979 the company was incorporated as a private company with limited liability and in 1990, within a Structural Adjustment Programme, it was converted to a Public Limited Company (PLC). It is a member of the Belgian Socfin, a global player group in the cultivation of oil palm as well as rubber, coffee and tropical flowers. Socfin owns 62.69% of Okomu Oil Palm's shares.

It has since grown to become one of Nigeria's leading oil palm companies with an oil palm area of 9.713 ha (2012) in the State of Edo, with plans to add 402 ha in 2013 and other 400 ha in 2014.

The company's 2012 annual report announced the intention to expand its oil palm and rubber plantations and also revealed plans to build the biggest oil mill in Africa expanding its oil mill capacity from 30 tons per hour to 60 tons per hour in Sierra Leone (see article below).

Among investors, the Okomu Oil Palm Company is presented as a success story, with the highest dividend in its history paid to shareholders in 2013. But in this kind of extractive agribusiness, the "success" for investors carries a high price for local communities.

In an interview with WRM, local resident Sunny Ajele, talks about how life for the communities has changed with the expansion of the oil palm plantations by Okomu: "Our experience started in 1998, when Okomu Oil Palm destroyed three villages namely: Oweike, Agbede, & Ijawcamp (Owieke, Ajbede and Ijawkam) without villagers receiving compensation. When the villages were destroyed, chiefs died in frustration when the bulldozers came without announcement. The state government set up a committee to investigate but they never visited the villages. The committee report claimed that the villagers were illegal occupants and the villages were founded only in the 1950s, though a section of that ad-hoc committee report contained evidence that the village had already existed in 1935. A forest ordinance also existed that gave the villagers the right to farm, to fish, to reside, and is dated 1912."

"As a result of that ad-hoc committee report, villagers felt devastated. Then in 2010, Okomu Oil Palm sent a final notice to Makilolo Community- my community that the community had certain days to leave. The note was delivered by the military police. The community at that stage said 'enough is enough', and we let the government know they should prepare for a mass burial if that was what was needed. Still, we got no response from the government."

"At that stage, the Managing Director of Okomu Oil Palm Dr. Graham Hefer, who had asked us to sign the Memorandum Of Understanding or face eviction,started his holidays. The said MOU was singlehandedly written by the company without our input. Police, security agencies and villagers met to try and resolve the situation. The Police chief stated that as long as the company had the

certificate of occupancy the village could not win. The police chief suggested ‘Go beg the company to let you stay.’ We said ‘That is not possible’. The village then also met with the Managing Director of Okomu Oil Palm. He proposed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), and said he expected a decision from the community on the offer within 24 hours.”

“Nobody in their right mind would have signed this MoU, it would have sent you straight into slavery. So the village refused to sign this MoU.”

“The company then locked the community in, they cut off access to the market. In order to get to the market, we had to make a huge detour, through another state in order to leave the area because they had us locked in. The straight route to Benin City takes about 1hour 30 minutes. Having to take the route through the state of Ondo, it is a whole day’s journey.”

Sunny talked about encounters with soldiers along the straight route to Benin City that the villagers normally used, saying that soldiers along that route had instruction that ‘if you see villagers, shoot’. The lock-in lasted from 17 December 2010 to 25 February 2011.

“We informed the police that the action would likely pose a public disturbance, that youth would rebel if the gate were not opened again soon. Nonetheless, the gate remained locked,” he explained.

“I received a misleading call to come to the office. I went and was arrested at the meeting place for allegedly planning to throw a bomb. They locked me up for a day and later I was released. On 18 January 2011, I was invited in again. A claim was made that I had kidnapped a white man in the plantation and that the man supposedly had been hurt seriously and had to be sent abroad for treatment. I asked ‘How could I have done that? I was in jail, with you, here, that day. How could I have kidnapped someone in the plantation at the same time?’ A State Security Service officer told me quietly that they were trying to set me up, and that this was a serious issue.”

“At that stage I cancelled my phone, left home and was on the run. I managed to get in touch, with ERA/FoEN's Head of Legal Department, Bar. Chima Williams through its project officer on forest & biodiversity. A letter was outrightly written by ERA to the management of Okomu Oil Palm PLC demanding that the only entrance and exit gate to the village locked by the company be made open to the community members; and secondly, the community people should not be compelled to sign an MOU that they are not part of. It was at that stage that ERA suggested to me to stop running.”

“A meeting was called with the Managing Director of Okomu Oil Palm, community representatives, state security service, soldiers, Paramount chiefs. The MD then wrote another agreement, promised to grade the road, to train 60 youth annually, to provide scholarships, to upgrade school…these promises were to be implemented by the end of 2011 - all on the condition that the village sign the MoU that the community had already rejected earlier. If that offer were not accepted, the company would offer nothing. And the village responded: ‘We cannot sign.’”

“At the same time, the company started working on some people in the village to sign the MoU. Some people eventually did sign that MoU. The company then claimed to have donated four litres of red palm oil and many books …but the donated books are still in the house of those who signed the MoU without consent from the community. The person who signed the MoU became special advisor on community matters to the company. All communication with the company has to go through him (he is also planning to run for paramount chief).”

“The road in late 2013 still only is half graded. In 2012, they started a bore hole because the river

villagers used to use is not usable anymore during the rainy season when all the agrotoxins that the company uses in the plantation get washed into the river. The villagers still drink the water but they know it is not good for them."

Allegations and criminalisation continued. Sunny Ajele for example was accused of running military camps. An officer informed him confidentially that the order had been to 'find him, fix him and finish him'; in other words, to kill Sunny.

Since then, the situation has become slightly less tense but still unbearable for the community. 50 acres were 'donated' to the village, on the condition that no permanent structures be erected, no planting be done, dogs, goats be kept out of the plantations, or else, the community would face eviction. Every vehicle coming to or leaving the village has to pay 200 Naira [some US$ 1.20] for use of the road, while food trucks pay more. Recently, charging of personal vehicles has stopped but commercial vehicles are still charged.

"Leaving the village or coming home is like passing a border. If they see that you come with a camera, your camera will be seized," Sunny explained. "The company has a hospital but only for their staff, not for villagers. They also have the right to come and search every 'house' at will. There is the constant accusation that we are stealing palm fruit. Over 20 villagers have been arrested. So we are slaves on our own land. The MoU gives the company the right to demolish our village any time, as they did with the other three villages. In those three areas, where planting has already started, people are prohibited to enter, while the plantings are guarded by soldiers, paid by the company."

This story speaks of the true cost of the expansion of oil palm. Humble and brave local people who stand up for their rights pay a high cost, and often risk their lives. Yet, the headlines go to the companies boasting about their revenues.

Based on an interview by Jutta Kill, WRM with Sunny Ajele during an international meeting held from 2 –5 November 2013 in Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria. See also the Calabar Declaration (http://wrm.org.uy/meetings-and-events/calabar-declaration/).