
[Nigeria: Okomu's oil palm plantations bring misery for women living in their vicinity](#)

Interview with Hajaratu Abdullahi from Community Forest Watch in Nigeria who talks about the hardship and misery that the palm oil company Okomu Oil, subsidiary of global palm oil company SocFin, is bringing to communities like hers in Nigeria's Edo state. She explains how the company's industrial plantation puts traditional use of oil palm and communities' food sovereignty at risk.

Oil palm cultivation is part of the way of life –indeed it is the culture– of millions of people in Nigeria and neighbouring countries. Oil palm trees grow naturally in this region and there is, therefore, a long history of traditional use not just of palm oil but all parts of the palm tree. In one regional dialect, oil palms are referred to as 'Osisi na ami ego' - 'the tree that produces money'. (1) But in Nigeria as elsewhere, this crucial source of cultural identity and economic well-being for rural communities is being threatened by the expansion of industrial oil palm plantations.

In this interview, Hajaratu Abdullahi from Community Forest Watch talks about how the palm oil company Okomu Oil is bringing hardship and misery to communities like hers in Nigeria's Edo state and how the company's industrial plantation puts traditional use of oil palm and communities' food sovereignty at risk.

Okomu Oil Palm Company was founded in 1976 as a state company, but the Luxemburg-registered global corporation SOCFIN now owns 63 per cent of the shares. In 1998, at least four villages were forcefully destroyed and the inhabitants evicted, with their houses, properties and farmland taken over by the company. Tensions between the company and affected communities rose and the company set up gates at the entrance roads to the plantations. Community members feel harassed and their movements are limited, in particular when the company imposed a night time curfew and controlled the entry of community activists it considered 'troublemakers'. "Leaving the village or coming home is like passing a border," a community activist explained in 2015. In 2015, the Edo state government ordered the revocation of land deals involving around 13,750 hectares that Okomu had marked for expansion of their oil palm plantations – an order the company has ignored to this day. In June 2017, in spite of several attempts at intimidation by security forces, oil palm impacted communities, peasants, women and civil society groups such as ERA/Friends of the Earth Nigeria, organised a protest against the complicity of the present Edo State Governor Obaseki with Okomu's activities.

WRM: How has life changed for women since Okomu's oil palm plantations arrived in your area?

Hajaratu Abdullahi: Since Okomu arrived in my community, there has been a lot of suffering for the women, because we have no more freedom of our own. Number one: Going and coming, there's no freedom any longer [because the company controls access to the villages inside the plantation through a series of gates where company security guards check and register all passing traffic]. Number Two: they can come into your farm without notification and destroy everything you planted, palm trees, your crops.

Some years ago, the company came into four communities at once, they pillaged everything, everyone was running helter-skelter. Nobody was there who you could cry to. The people who are supposed to be there for you to cry to, they were not there, maybe they had taken money. It was only one person who came out, called some youth, some men, who said "Let's fight this battle for future generations' reference" And that's how the community resistance started, this struggle against Okomu started. That's more than 15 years ago now.

And we have to keep mobilizing because we are still suffering. Now, with these company plantations all around, we have no freedom to enter our forests, our farms, the forest reserves, the areas we used to pick snails. We survive on snails, we survive on vegetables. All these things, we have no access to them anymore, but they are what provided for us.

Secondly, you know, we women in Nigeria, we depend on traditional herbs. For example, when a woman is pregnant, as early as just one month, there are certain herbs we give to her; then, throughout the pregnancy, she will be given different herbs. From two months to four, we use a different herb again, it continues like that. When she gets to eight months, there is a particular herb that pregnant women are given, so that the placenta will follow with the baby, so that there will be no bleeding. But now with the company plantations, all these herbs are nowhere to be found. We walk and walk and walk, searching for herbs. You cannot get them anymore. You cannot imagine the problem this has become for the women. It's the plantations that make us suffer. Because before, even when there was nothing left at home, the woman knew how to take care of her family, because she had her farm and the forest. But since Okomu came into our communities, to our state, into the country, there have been real problems. We are hungry, because there is nothing to survive with, because you cannot even pick any seeds of palm fruit or they arrest you.

WRM: What happens when you collect more?

Hajaratu Abdullahi: They will get you arrested! And who will come for you, to get you out?

One time, Okomu came and broke a bridge that we had built for ourselves. They just came and broke it! One of the chiefs, he said "How can you come and break the bridge we built? You must replace it." They never replaced our bridge. The women, we used the bridge to pass to the different places from where we get our vegetables and other things that feed us. How can we go there now that the bridge is gone?

Another example. About a year or two years ago, a group of women went to go and set traps in the river, so we could catch some fish. The traps were seized by the Managing Director of Okomu. Until today, those traps have not been released. Setting traps, fishing, cultivating, these are the things we do to make some money. And replacing these traps is really expensive. These are things we did to take care of the family. If you don't make money, you cannot take care of your family, cannot send your children to school. A lot of our children - they are at home now because there is no money to further their education.

WRM: How about jobs for village women in the company?

Hajaratu Abdullahi: There are none! And there is no compensation. Even if they are doing one or two things for compensation in other communities, in Okomu community, the community never accepted anything. And they are not even ready. We have soldiers in our communities.

And there is no freedom of movement for us. Sometime in April 2018, when a community activist

from Cameroon came to share his experiences with us, he said "Let me go and visit these communities." One of the communities we wanted to visit, was Okomu. We arrived on a Saturday. To get to the communities inside the plantation, you have to use pass the company gates. [See also WRM Bulletin 199] When we get to the gates, we got out to sign ourselves in before entering the plantation. Then, the company people looked at our vehicle and said "On your vehicle, you don't have a sticker. If you don't have a sticker you cannot go in." "Ok, where do we get this sticker," I asked. "The office is over there," they said, and I said "Ok, let us go in." "No, no, no you cannot go today. Come back on Monday." So, we have to wait until Monday to go see our family?

At that moment we said, this is impossible. If they want to arrest me or kill me, they will kill me. If I have no freedom to go to my community, with my sister, with my brothers, there is a big problem. At last, an officer came out and asked what was happening. We explained, and only because we insisted, in the end, they allowed us to go in. This is the kind of control that the communities inside the plantations are facing each time they have to pass those gates.

WRM: Can you say something about the type of conflicts and impacts that communities affected by Okomu's plantations are suffering?

Hajratu Abdullahi: There is a community very close to our community, too. Sometime last year, during the mango season – there used to be lots of mangos, we collect them, take them to market, other fruits also, butter pear and so on - because the mangos are so few now, men and women - you can guess - started fighting. 'It was me who collected it', no it's mine, not yours', it happens like that now.

There's another community where the plantations just entered. In this community, a lot of women are into farming. In this community, one woman had a very big, large Cocoa Plantation. The Management of Okomu Oil and the Nigerian army and police providing security for the company came into the plantation - that was the end of her plantation. She used to go to market every week and sell her produce. Now, nothing! Her daughter now looks for small things to hawk, cooks rice, she's hawking small things like that. She was supposed to be a graduate by now, had to drop out of school.

In another village, Odigi, when the company people came, maybe they enticed the traditional rulers, they gave away their farms. Those people have just an acre to farm now, not even a hectare. An acre to farm, that's all. They are going to the neighbouring community. The neighbouring community will tell them "You are not getting our land. You have given away your land. Our land already is not enough. This way, conflict between communities starts, even *killings*, one such case is now in court. You see, these are the sorts of challenges communities face when these plantations take over your land.

Another example. Women used to grow plantain. Taking plantain they cultivate in their farms to market, women can make at least 30-40,000 Naira from every market. So what happens when the land is gone to the plantations company? How much are you going to give to me? Shall I just eat today's food and forget about tomorrow? Then I will not have land to plant for my children. What when we are no more? How will our children survive? Even pepper, ordinary pepper, this time of year it's about 8,000/12,000 Naira at the market, but you have nothing to take to the market if you have no land to farm. We do not even have enough land to grow enough ordinary pepper! And if you don't guard the small place you have very close to your house, another person will take it.

You see some old women suffering, they have nothing. So we start fetching firewood, walking far to

get firewood to sell, so they have something to survive. I can give too many more examples like this. These are only some of the challenges we are facing. We have no freedom.

WRM: What about violence the company directs directly at women?

Hajratu Abdullahi: They don't even know if women exist. They don't know if women exist, with protest or without protest. If we do a protest today, tomorrow they will bring out their own crowd, bring out their own story in the media. They will say "This is somebody else we want to ask", and the person will say "Okomu is doing us well, Okomu is giving us this, they are giving us that." This interference from Okomu, it causes a lot of conflict inside the community. That is why I told them to live wisely now. Because yesterday is gone, Today: live it wisely, Tomorrow: you don't know whether you will get there or not. Maybe you have sold your rights yesterday, but today don't sell your rights! Because now, our eyes are open. The people you are supposed to cry to - the government: they are our problem. You will be doing what you're doing in your community but the government will be doing what they are doing above your heads. So can I fight the government alone? No!

WRM: How was Okumu able to obtain community land?

Hajratu Abdullahi: There is no compensation for the distress these companies bring upon women. The company will invite the elders, the oldest men in the community to come for a meeting. When they go there, the company people will say "Baba, come, come, come. Just sign this paper." One elder said "How am I going to sign? I cannot even read it, how can I sign. Because if I am ready to sign, I will have first read it. So I am not ready to sign, because my community is not aware of this. This invitation - you are inviting me to come and sign what? Then they call the Secretary "Secretary, you sign." Luckily the Secretary also said, "What do you mean? I come and sign? Is the community aware of what you invited us here for?" They pushed them away.

Then they invited a different party, just two persons. They said, "Just don't mind them, they are foolish. I will sign." A woman from that village called me and said "These people, see what they are doing to our community. Somebody has gone to sign an agreement with the company." I told her to call a meeting immediately, to make the community aware. The community came together and said that they are not supporting the agreement those people have signed. It was documented, so those who signed are on their own.

WRM: We learn in other places, for example in Sierra Leone that there is an increase of sexual violence that the women suffer directly from the company guards or the company workers. Is that the same in the case of Okomu in Nigeria? We know it is a very difficult issue, and that sometimes the women are not even saying it...

Hajratu Abdullahi: Even if it happened to many of them, no one would talk. In our tradition, for a married woman to even be seen discussing petty things with a man, she will be in trouble. It's not like that in all communities. But in the area where I am married to, you are not to stand with a man having irrelevant talks. So, in such a reality, something might be happening to a women, she will not talk. There are also so many cases where you want to bring them up before the police. But you will not see the beginning and the end of the case. So this the reason why you see people, when they have some certain problem, they hold it onto themselves. So that is the issue. Not that it doesn't happen. It happens. But when it does, women keep it to themselves.

WRM: When you were a young girl, how was the community like?

Hajratu Abdullahi: So different. When I was a young girl, at the age of 12, you could bath naked, play when it's raining, you just roamed around.

WRM: And how was the place?

Hajratu Abdullahi: The temperature was nice and cool. You go to the cocoa plantation, pick them. You come home and say ah, mami, this is what I want to eat. And if it was not at home, you could just go to the forest and field behind and pick what you needed. On the way, you could pick up some snails, pluck some leaf, like cocoa leaf; you grind it, and there's a way you turn it into a soup. You can even take this groundnut without even putting it in fire - get the groundnut, grind it, add a little pepper, salt, make a dish called Cocoa Soup. Food was plenty. But nowadays, nowadays it's not like that anymore.

(1) See WRM Bulletin 161 (2010): [Oil palm in Nigeria: shifting from smallholders and women to mass production](#).

See also:

WRM Bulletin 233 (2017): [SOCFIN's plantations in Africa: many places of violence and destruction](#).

WRM Bulletin 199 (2014): [Okomu Oil Palm Company – destroying communities for oil palm expansion](#).