Peoples March Against Land Grabbing And Deforestation In Edo State

Sing &stand For Nature
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Cover Image Bodo City by Babawale Obayanju
Environmental Rights Action Friends of the Earth Nigeria supported the call of members of Okomu PLC forest bearing communities and Civil Society groups demand to march against the Palm Oil Giant industry and land grabbing in Edo State. After series of planning meetings with the representatives of the various communities and the civil society coalition they finally took to the street on the 21st day of June 2017 to demand the defense of community land rights, called on Edo State Government to enforce its revocation order against Okomu PLC and for the Palm Oil company to obey the government revocation order and stop bulldozing the forest.

The people are from Civil Society groups, Coalition of Farmers Association, lawyers, teachers, environmentalists, human rights defenders and more than 20 forest bearing communities impacted by the activities of Okomu PLC within the Owan and Okomu forest reserves. The communities among others are: Oke, Ekpan, Umokpe, Orhua, Ozalla, Sabo, Odiguetue, Uzeba, Odighi, Avbiosi, Sobe, Uhiere, Owan, Makilolo, Okomu village, Agbede, I k camp, Lemo, Oweike, Ugbebezi, Oke-ora, Aturunu, Ogbezu, Sabogida Ora, Agudezi, Uhunmora etc.

The people also pointed out that “the rising land grabbing for oil palm plantations in Cross River and Edo States are affront on the rural communities and a source of major livelihoods. In particular, land de-reserved for afforestation in Edo state was commercialized through shady land deals that were not transparent. The Edo State Government under former Governor Adams Oshiomhole decisively reserved the land sale through the Edo State Government of Nigeria Gazette revocation order published on November 5th, 2015 covering about 13, 750 hectares spread through Okomu Forests reserve to Owan West LGAs. Till date, Okomu Oil Company PLC has disregarded the Edo State government revocation order.
Representatives of the above stated groups numbering to over 1000 people converged at the Benin Museum before embarking on the protest march against Okomu Oil Palm Company. Before moving to the Edo State House of Assembly from the point of convergence, the Executive Director of Environmental Rights Action and the leader of the Civil Society Organizations in Edo State for the protest march addressed the crowd and put their demands to the general public. The demands made by them are as follows:

1. That Okomu Oil Palm PLC should obey the Edo State Government revocation order of 13,750 hectares of de-reserved land in Owan and Okomu forest reserves,

2. Government should support family farming and local food systems, not destructive industrial Agriculture,

3. Stop Deforestation and Land grabbing for large-scale Oil palm plantation expansion by Okomu Oil Palm Company PLC,

4. Plantations are not forest, Save our forest or face dangerous climate crisis,

5. Trading our forests for industrial oil palm plantations business is a dangerous eco-business that have devastating negative social and environmental impacts,

6. Edo state government should prioritize public good over private interest,

7. Federal Government of Nigeria: No due process, No EIA certification for Okomu Oil Palm Company PLC,

8. Communities are the best custodians of forests and nature, Community forest management method is the answer to food deficit.
At the Edo State House of Assembly, the coalition submitted a petition to the Speaker of the House with copies sent to the Oba of Benin.

The Speaker, Edo State House of Assembly, gave his assurances that he was going to take up the petition to the floor of the house for debate when necessary.

The march moved to the Edo Government House and the same demands above were made. But to our greatest shock, neither the Governor nor any of his representatives showed up to address the crowd. The participants expressed disappointment having waited for more than three (3) hours without hearing or seeing the Governor or his Aides speak to them.

The protest march also called at the Nigerian Union of Journalist Secretariat where Journalists were briefed on the purpose of the March. The NUJ Chairman through the PRO assured the people of the community that NUJ is dedicated supporting the struggle.

Closing the Protest March, the Executive Director of ERA assured the people of the community that they still have the support of the coalitions and advised them to reject any form of financial inducement from the likes of Okomu PLC in order not to distract them from making their demands.
SING & STAND FOR NATURE

A project of Friends of the Earth Africa’s Forest and Biodiversity office, hosted in Nigeria by ERA/FoEN

By Babawale Obayanju and Ubrei-Joe M. Mariere
Discussion about the rich forest, dependants on its products, deforestation and its implication for Mother Earth is become very important as the world is getting hotter and closer to the 1.5°C temperature increase benchmark issued by climate scientists.

In Nigeria, it has been asserted that we have the highest rate of deforestation globally. According to Food and Agriculture Organization, FAO of the UN in a space of 5 years in 2005 we lost 55.7% of our primary forest to logging, timber exports, and monoculture plantations of the big transnational corporations and as fuel wood for rural dwellers. Loss of livelihoods, endangered biodiversity, and increased potential for desertification are also the immediate consequence of this act of ours.

Globally, this dastardly act of deforestation is releasing enormous amount of carbon (iv) oxide co2 into the atmosphere there by contributing to global warming and or climate change. This development is one that we must stand and seek for a stop and total reversal on the trend. The Environmental Rights Action/Friends of the Earth Nigeria amongst other strategies took to the stage on the 20th of September 2017 in collaboration with Friends of the Earth Africa’s Forest & Biodiversity Program to mark the United Nations International day against monoculture tree plantations. Songs were rendered by prominent musicians from across Edo state with lyrics on environment and social justice, the people danced and made chant saying “our forest is our life; no to deforestation and land grabbing”.

We used this opportunity to denounce in strong terms the negative environmental and social impacts of monoculture plantations on communities and ecosystems.

In particular, the voracious expansion of Wilmar PZ oil palm operations in Cross River State from about 40,000 hectares to additional 50 hectares is leading to land scarcity for small scale farmers and resulting in local food shortage and rising food prices. Similarly, here in Edo State, Okomu Oil Palm PLC is expanding its oil palm operations by additional 13,750 hectares. In both cases, land grabbing and loss of access to farmlands and forests, deforestation, impacts on community land rights, impacts on water supply, and local food shortages are some of the negative consequences. There is neither respect for the rule of law nor community Free, Prior, and Informed Consent sought concerning such shady land deals and industrial plantations.

In the case of Okomu Oil Palm PLC they have flagrantly disregarded Edo State Government Revocation Order for 13,750 hectares for the company’s expansion of their oil palm plantation. The Edo State Government Edict was signed into law on November 5, 2015 by the former Edo State Government. Till date, and in spite of all entreaties and pressure, Okomu Oil PLC is defiant and has failed to respect the Edo State Government Revocation Order.

Instead it has deliberately and confrontationally continued the aggressive forests and farmlands clearance for oil palm planting. Their operation is currently displacing and dispossessing about 60,000 small scale farmers across four local government areas in Edo state: Ovia South West, Ovia North East, Owain West and Uhuumwode. Some of the communities impacted include, Makilolo, Agbede, Odighi, odiguetue, Orhua, Umokpe, Uzebba, Uzalla, and Sabogida Ora.
These forest communities came in their numbers to make their plight known and make demands for justice. Civil society groups, students from several high schools and many other men and women from around Benin City turned out also in their numbers standing in solidarity for our forest.

Also present were folks from Friends of the Earth Togo, Liberia and Ghana who gave insight on the struggles against monoculture plantation corporations and farmers in their climes.

Young people were quizzed on environmental/climate change topics. It was very obvious that young people have a broad understanding to climate change and some of the solutions they advocated were quite encouraging. Awards were presented to all the students that participated in the quiz competition.

Speaking at the concert, the Executive Director of ERA/FoEN Dr. Godwin Uyi Ojo appreciated participants for making out time to be a part of the concert. He emphasized on the purpose for the concert, calling on everyone present to resist the ideology that defines plantations as forest.
He stressed that climate change is real and that all hands must be on deck to mitigate and or adapt to the consequences of the phenomenon.

Kwami Kpondzo of Friends of the Earth spoke on the need for strengthened international collaboration among Africa Countries with the aim of protect our diminishing forest resources and halt the expansion of oil palm plantations in the fight against climate change.

**Press briefing and Environmental Parliament**

On 21st of September ERA/FoEN with Friends of the Earth Africa’s Forest & Biodiversity Program held a press briefing/environmental parliament which had about 60 participants drawn from more than 40 forests impacted communities by Okomu PLC activities, media and civil society organizations in attendance.

In his welcome address, Dr Ojo thanked participants for their commitment. This convergence has as focus the Nigerian environment and also as a space to amplify the voice of resistance by the impacted communities. The protest of June 21, 2017 is yielding results as global actors have become more aware of the atrocities by Okomu PLC and lending their voices in support for the struggle, he said.
Continuing he gave an overview of the essence of the international day against monoculture plantations and noted that the initiative was launched in Brazil, 2004, the occasion serves to create a special moment of reflection on the status of our environment that is facing serious assault from industrial large scale plantations. “We want to use this opportunity to denounce in strong terms the negative environmental and social impacts of monoculture plantations on communities and ecosystems”, he stated.

The Executive Director reiterated that just like Wilmar PZ in Cross River State, in Edo State, Okomu Oil Palm PLC is expanding its oil palm operations by additional 13,750 hectares. In both cases, land grabbing and loss of access to farmlands and forests, deforestation, impacts on community land rights, impacts on water supply, and local food shortages are some of the negative consequences. There is neither respect for the rule of law nor community Free, Prior, and Informed Consent sought concerning such shady land deals and industrial plantations.

Concluding his remark, Godwin Uyi Ojo said that the impacted communities and CSOs have demanded that the “Edo State Government should stop treating Okomu Oil Palm PLC with kid gloves. We urge the present Governor, His Excellency, Godwin Obaseki to take the bull by the horn and ensure enforcement of the revocation order against the recalcitrant Okomu Oil Palm PLC so as to compel them to conduct business within the ambit of the law”.
Rita Uwaka coordinator of the Forest and biodiversity programme of ERA/FoEN and FoEAfrica expressed her worries on the situation befalling Okomu forest communities. We need to put our heads together to defeat Okomu Oil palm Plc, the action of the company is destroying local food system, she said.

Today is a day set aside to recognize communities struggling against monoculture plantation. A lot of our community peoples are losing touch with their forest as a result of the illegal felling of forest trees and the destruction of other flora and fauna for monoculture plantation. There is therefore an urgent need on the side of government to stand and assuage the plight of maintaining the forest and preserving livelihoods of those who elected them to office. They should commence this action by upholding the revocation order on illegal acquired lands by Okomu Oil Palm Plc here in Edo State.

PANEL DISCUSSION

A five man panel of discussants led by Dr. Godwin Uyi Ojo was constituted to discuss the impacts of large scale industrial plantations in relation to environmental degradation, human rights violations and food sovereignty for Africa, while unmasking the false solutions, it will also provide a gender-centered analysis of impacts and the way forward to achieving food for all in Africa.

They had this to say:
Edward Suloe of Friends of the Earth Liberia focused his discussion on “Industrial Oil Palm Plantations in Liberia”.

Liberia have a population of 4 million people and but have 4% of the total Forest in Africa and larger part of the forest has been given out resulting to eviction of local people from their lands with much impacts on the livelihood of the people and climate change. Because of climate change farmers are confused over seasonal variations. There is high level of forest degradation, militarization of the community people and people have no access to land which is increasing food insecurity system. When the people are divided it becomes difficult to achieve results. NGOs we build the capacity of the people, empower them and create platforms for them to speak up. Logging is so rampant in my country posing serious challenges, in this regard mass action.

Kwami Kpondzo of Friends of the Earth Togo focused on “Industrial Oil Palm Plantations in Togo”

Whenever we talk about Monoculture Plantations we are talking of the issues of land grabbing, deforestation and conflicts among communities. Few years ago we managed to have a coalition against oil palm plantations. Before then there were exportation of oil palm products, but in 2005 the company collapsed. In 2016, the information we got in our participation of EIA process is that a certain company has announced that they will produce oil palm in 6,000 hectares which will result to the production of 6,000,000 tons of palm oil. But in Togo it does not matter to them because the land space used for such business is far lesser than what is acquired by plantation companies in Nigeria.

What we normally do is to raise awareness among community people involved in forest telling them of the important of forest and how they can take care of the forests. The government is trying to seize community forest management system but we are also raising awareness on the REDD+ program because we know that it is a false solution to climate change.
Abdullahi Hajaratu is the Leader of Nigeria Women Farmers Association and the focus of her discussion was on “The Impacts of Industrial Plantations in Nigeria/Africa”

Deforestation affects women mostly and their farm lands. The process is causing scarcity of food. Okomu collects land at will which gradually results to eviction. We lack vegetables, Garri. We use our farm produce to help our children and as sources of livelihoods. Okomu claimed to own the community and this is generating issues in the communities. Okomu should go away, no body invited them so we don’t need them. There is divide and rule in the communities and most people collects money and the money these people collected from Okomu is just one day food but we need everyday food.
Amos Akpeezo of Friends of the Earth Ghana. His discussion was centered on “Industrial Oil Palm Plantations in Ghana”

“Communities are the most impacted group as a result of deforestation and it affects women and children most in the society. We have a system that promotes community forest management systems, though it is not perfect. Tungya system is a good system that allows community to grow crops and trees at the same time promoting sustainable development and also a form of forest restoration that is community led.

Our situation in Ghana is not different from what is happening in Nigeria. About 50% of deforestation is attributed to commercial agriculture. We are still addressing some questions of Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) in our communities in terms of land grabbing. CSOs are fighting for the voices of local communities to be heard also using the media. In Ghana is only when the media gets involved that is when government wants to take discussion serious. The media set the agenda for policy discussion in Ghana. Politicians only want to get involved only when media takes the centre stage. We need to promote a strong partnership with other groups and the media. It will be very important for Edo state to halt expansion of oil palm plantations”.

Godwin Ojo: When communities are involved in community forest system, do they benefit monetarily? The community people generate income from trees and crops and they get 40% of the income generated from the sales of the trees they plant. There is a documentation of the trees planted by farmers and what they expect to generate from the trees.
Ajele Sunday is the National Chairman of Community Forest Watch, the focus of his discussion was on “the Impacts of Plantations on Community Rights, Lives and Livelihood”

“The prices of food stuff are going up every year and people have not asked why this is happening. This is because farmers have lost their lands. I have been invited by militaries for questions after the protests and today a curfew has been imposed on over 50 communities to stop them from entering their communities from 6pm to 6 am. In our communities there are no schools, no hospitals and if any one falls ill they can’t access medical facilities at Udo which is the nearest health centre to the communities.

This is a regular occurrence but the government has kept quiet over the years. There is no doubt that the oil palm plantation has been Federal Government projects, but since Okomu took over since 1990 over 5 communities have been evicted. Today what we get from the community is intimidation. Our people have been arrested with fake charges. Let us work together in solidarity to salvage the situation”.

Ausine Osakue, Executive Director of Foundation for Good Governance and Social Change led a team to proffer a way forward on the issues raised:

“The regions in Nigeria are endowed with several agricultural blessing that served as the big source of the GDP of the nation until the advent of crude oil which has caused us more damage than good; In the Northern part of Nigeria we had the groundnut pyramids, in the Western part cocoa, while in the South timber and rubber. Taking a walk down memory lane, we would realize that this old agricultural practices were based on smallholder farming system not corporation based.

From the events that have happened with the company in question, it is clear that the Managing Director of Okomu PLC is running the company on behalf of the Europeans and not Nigerians. The money they generate is repatriated back to Europe and our government by their inactions and silence are encouraging these land grabbers because they make money from the business without considering our farmers.

There is a national resistance in Nigeria and people are saying that they are tired of the country. The Environment as a matter of urgency must begin to see the issues as a clear livelihood matter, the governor of Edo State has opportunity dialogue with the Edo people. The livelihood of the people must be protected.”

As a group, ERA should commission a body to do a 30 minutes documentary on the impact of Okomu as soon as possible. There is need for continuous engagement and within one month ERA should train Journalists on field training and ensured that the Journalists go to the field to collect data. There is need for continuous visit to the impacted communities, stating that an existing coalition will visit all the impacted communities and Okomu PLC for fact findings.

In conclusion I urge everyone to have the community people at heart and we should remember that there are more than 10,000 community people who can’t eat on a daily basis. Those that are ready to farm today government have ganged up against them and given their lands to land grabbers.
“The time to act is now is now. The idea professing that plantations are forest must be put to a stop. We also need to inform the Governor that this is not a good development model. We are saying that communities are the best custodians of their forests, and forest should be put in their care through sustainable community forest management. Okomu oil palm plc is not above the law and they should be made to account”… Rita Uwaka, Coordinator of Friends of the Earth Africa’s Forest and Biodiversity Program

Therefore We make the following demands:

Ø Edo State Government should enforce its land Revocation Order and compel Okomu Oil Plc to comply with the revocation Edict.
Ø Okomu Oil Palm PLC should comply with the Edo State Revocation Order and commence regeneration of the degraded forests and farmlands.
Ø Adequate compensation should be paid to farmers whose farms and food crops have been destroyed by the rampaging bulldozers of the Company.
Ø Local farmers should be encouraged to farm local staple foods and not to be dispossessed from their ancestral lands in favour of transnational companies under the guise of employment generation.
Ø Edo State Government should not mortgage the sovereignty of Edo State and the Federal Government as no individual or company is above the laws of Nigeria.
Ø Okomu Oil Palm PLC should provide relief measures and food to cushion food shortage challenges facing displaced farmers suffering from land dispossession and farm crops destruction.

Plantations are not forests. The Environment is Our Life. It is not for Sale.
Environmental Rights Action (ERA)/Friends of the Earth Nigeria is a Nigerian advocacy group dedicated to the non-violent defence of the human ecosystem in terms of human rights. It was founded in January 1993. ERA/FoEN is the Nigerian chapter of Friends of the Earth International (FoEI). ERA is also the coordinating NGO for the Oilwatch International as well as the host of the secretariat of the Africa Tobacco Control regional Initiative. ERA is also the coordinating NGO for the Nigerian Tobacco Control Alliance. The organization’s committed struggles for environmental human rights has won it recognition through awards such as the Sophie Prize (1998) for excellence and courage in the struggle for environmental justice and the Bloomberg Award for Tobacco control activism (2009).

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