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The politics of the forest frontier: Negotiating between conservation, development, and indigenous rights in Cross River State, Nigeria☆

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria's once thriving plantation economy has suffered under decades of state neglect and political and civil turmoil. Since Nigeria's return to civilian rule in 1999, in a bid to modernize its ailing agricultural economy, most of its defunct plantations were privatized and large new areas of land were allocated to 'high-capacity' agricultural investors. This paper explores the local tensions associated with this policy shift in Cross River State, which, due to its favorable agro-ecological conditions and investment climate, has become one of Nigeria's premier agricultural investment destinations. It shows how the state's increasing reliance on the private sector as an impetus for rural transformation is, paradoxically, crowding out smallholder production systems and creating new avenues for rent capture by political and customary elites. Moreover, as Nigeria's most biodiverse and forested state, the rapid expansion of the agricultural frontier into forest buffer zones is threatening to undermine many of the state's conservation initiatives and valuable common pool resources. The paper goes on to explain why and how private sector interests in Cross River State are increasingly being prioritized over natural resource protection, indigenous rights over the commons, and smallholder production systems.

Introduction

For many, the Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN, 1986) is the penultimate 'paradox of plenty'. With more than three-quarters of government revenues derived from hydrocarbons (IMF, 2013), Nigeria's rentier state has long been notorious for oil politics and patrimonial accumulation (Schatz, 1984; Ikpe, 2000; Omeje, 2005). This has given rise to entrenched ethno-regional commercial and bureaucratic classes that serve primarily to articulate and advance the interests of international capital at the expense of domestic productive investment (Vaughan, 1995; Omeje, 2005). As a result, Nigeria's development has been long marked by economic mismanagement, regional marginalization, civil disorder, and ethnic and religious sectionalism (Gore and Pratten, 2003; Pierce, 2006).

Despite its continued reliance on extractive industries, Nigeria remains an agrarian economy – with the majority of the population residing in rural areas and engaged in agricultural production (FRN, 2013). Yet where Nigeria was once a major exporter of cash crops and self-sufficient in most food crops, protracted crises and state neglect following the emergence of the oil economy has made Nigeria one of the largest net food importers in sub-Saharan Africa (Korieh, 2010; Odozi and Omonona, 2012). However, with rising rural poverty and unemployment, the agricultural sector is increasingly being considered an important target for Nigeria's economic diversification strategies. Especially since the end of Nigeria's long military rule in 1999, the government has been actively pursuing the commercialization of the agricultural economy through market-led reforms, as has been formally articulated in the 2003 National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) and the 2012 Agricultural Transformation Agenda (ATA) (Adesina, 2012; Iwuchukwu and Igbokwe, 2012). This has involved inter alia the privatization of the state's agricultural assets and the promotion of private-sector investment in priority value chains (Adesina, 2012).

The fertile and tropical Cross River State (CRS), located in southeast Nigeria along the Cameroon border, has since the colonial era been one of Nigeria's largest producers of export crops such as cocoa, rubber, and oil palm (Udo, 1965). By the 1970s, however, most of the state's large private and state-owned plantations had degraded into a state of disrepair or had been altogether abandoned. In line with federal government policy, recent state administrations have actively embraced the private sector as a means to rehabilitate these plantations and restore its once thriving

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agricultural economy (GoCRS, 2004, 2009). Whether these efforts will, in fact, serve to alleviate high rates of rural poverty in the state can though be debated; particularly in light of mounting evidence to suggest that without effective governance mechanisms, increasing private sector participation in cultivation may instead crowd out smallholder production systems (Deininger, 2011; de Schutter, 2011; German et al., 2013; Schoneveld, 2013). Such threats are especially pertinent to Nigeria, particularly following the enactment of the 1978 Land Use Decree, which transferred all land-management authorities from traditional institutions to state and district government. The subsequent loss of legal protection for many customary claims to land and its resources has enhanced the threat of dispossession and displacement (Otubu, 2008; Alden Wily, 2011).

The 5000 km^2 Oban-Korup forest block, which covers large parts of CRS and continues into Cameroon, represents more than 50% of Nigeria's remaining tropical high forest and is considered one of Africa's most important biotic reserves (Oates, 1999; Kamdem-Toham et al., 2006).[1] Already experiencing rapid degradation from an ever-expanding agricultural frontier, a resurgent plantation economy could serve to exacerbate pressures on forest resources (Oyebo et al., 2011). Despite this, the incumbent state government appears to exhibit genuine commitment to reconciling development and conservation objectives, as is reflected in the enactment of a deforestation moratorium in 2010 and in its active engagement with the Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) initiative (UN REDD, 2012).[2] However, since most non-forested land in the state is heavily cultivated, if the expansion of plantation agriculture were to respect forest conservation objectives then that could likely have dire socio-economic implications.

Sustainable agricultural development in the state, therefore, involves striking a delicate balance between competing land use systems and economic and political interests. In practice, however, this often results in trade-offs (Neumann, 1997; Sanderson and Redford, 2003; Hirsch et al., 2011; McShane et al., 2011); with, historically, agribusiness expansion in forest frontiers, such as in the Amazon Basin and Southeast Asia, typically resulting in widespread environmental degradation and displacement of indigenous systems of production (Rudel et al., 2009; Schoneveld, 2010). Against this compelling backdrop, this paper analyzes the implications of the state's new agricultural modernization policies on forest conservation and indigenous rights. Considering Nigeria's patrimonial political structures, it is focused, in particular, on the underlying political-economic processes and state-society-investment interactions that shape priorities and, ultimately, outcomes. In so doing, this paper offers insight into the governance obstacles to reconciling potentially divergent and conflicting policy objectives.

As background, the next section provides a historical overview of the evolution of the plantation economy and conservation management in CRS. After a brief outline of the methodological approach, the section that follows will present the study findings. The findings will center on two different processes: the privatization of defunct state farms and the establishment of Greenfield plantations. The paper will conclude with a reflection on findings and implications for governance.

Historical background

The rise and demise of the plantation economy

In spite of ideal conditions to cultivate numerous economic tree crops, under British colonial administration the development of European-owned plantations in Southern Nigeria was actively discouraged. Under the Dual Mandate, which formed the basis of British policy in Tropical Africa, peasant production was considered to be more economically viable and would protect colonial authorities from the political and social unrest arising from a growing landless class (Udo, 1965, Ijere, 1974; Hinds, 1997).[3] It was assumed that the native system of land rights was incompatible with the extension of state power over land (Francis, 1984; Berry, 1992). In contrast to British East Africa colonies, where conditions were more conducive to European settlement, in Southern Nigeria this policy largely protected systems of customary tenure and restricted European plantation companies from obtaining interests in land (Hancock, 1942; Meredith, 1984).

The only companies to have successfully acquired land were the prominent Miller Brothers and United Africa Company (UAC), who managed to obtain the consent to develop two rubber plantations in 1905 and 1907, respectively; only after attempts to safeguard Southern Nigeria's wild rubber export industry had failed (Munro, 1981; Steyn, 2003; Fenske, 2012).[4] In order to expand its acreage under oil palm, UAC later made numerous attempts to acquire more land (UAC, 1938; GoN, 1938; Wilson, 1954; Nworah, 1972; Fieldhouse, 1994). In order to protect the Nigeria oil palm industry from rising competition from the East Indies, UAC pled for the development of a tripartite agreement, where the government would provide land and oversight, the UAC the technical, commercial, and managerial expertise, and the 'African' the labor (UAC, 1944). The government strongly rebuked this position, arguing that as a result of high population densities in the Eastern Region and strong traditional attachments to land, foreign-owned plantations would "at once be suspect and ... bring forth such a storm of protest that its success would be heavily prejudiced from the start" (GoN, 1944, p. 3). Rather, it contended that interventions should be directed at improving the quality of oil obtained from existing palms, establish plantations through settler schemes in the lesser populated areas, and introduce mechanical extraction through so-called pioneer oil mills (GoN, 1944, p. 4).

In 1954, as part of British political reform in Nigeria, the Lyttelton Constitution was passed, introducing a system of federalism in Nigeria that transferred many aspects of economic planning to its three regional governments (Northern, Western, and Eastern Regions) (Lynn, 2002). This marked the beginning of the indigenization of agricultural policy in Eastern Nigeria and transformed the nature of government support to the agricultural sector (Udo, 1965; Korieh, 2010). Breaking from earlier policy, the Eastern Nigerian Development Corporation (ENDC), a quasi-government corporation established in 1954 to promote industrial development in the region, began investing directly in large-scale rubber and oil palm plantations.

[1] For example, it is home to numerous endangered mammal species, such as the drill (*Mandrillus leucophaeus*), Preuss's red colobus (*Procolobus badius preussi*), Preuss's guenon (*Cercopithecus preussi*), Cross River chimpanzee (*Pan troglodytes ellioti*), collared mangabey (*Cercocebus torquatus*), russet-eared guenon (*Cercopithecus erythrotis*), leopard (*Panthera pardus*), and forest elephant (*Loxodonta africana*) (Kamdem-Toham et al., 2006).

[2] REDD+ is an international initiative spearheaded by the United Nations to generate financial value for the carbon stored in forests. It offers incentives for developing countries to minimize emissions associated within forest conversion and invest in pathways for low-carbon development (Angelsen, 2009).

[3] The Dual Mandate refers to the principles underlying British policy of indirect rule in its Protectorates, where local administration was shared with traditional rulers. According to Lugard (1922), this policy was premised on the obligation to protect local practices and institutions, while simultaneously using these institutions to promote peasant-based production, exportation, and taxation.

[4] Until 1929, UAC was known as the Lever Brothers. UAC is now owned by Unilever.