

SIAT Nigeria land grabbing, pollution, causing hardship in host communities

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SIAT Nigeria land grabbing, pollution, causing hardship in host communities

by Elfredah Kevin-Alerechi and Kevin Woke

(See Video documentary [here](#))



A 5-month investigation by Elfredah Kevin-Alerechi and Kevin Woke revealed how SIAT Nigeria Limited is grabbing host communities' lands and paying them only six hundred Naira (N600) per hectare annually. This is three times less the amount of what land owners typically pay to neighbouring villages to buy a ridge of farmland for a farming season. The company's operations have contaminated the streams and rivers that serve as the majority's supply of drinking water.

In October 2019, Emmanuel Emeka, a fisherman in Mgbu-Anyim village had gone to fish at the mini-Onua, mini-Igwe and mini-Igbu rivers in Elele Alimini of Rivers State, only to see dead fishes floating on the surface of the river. SIAT Nigeria Limited, a Belgian company, has polluted the river with its fertilisers and chemicals used for weed and pest control, he alleged.

Emeka claimed he stopped fishing in the river because, after spending hours exploring it, he would always come up empty-handed. "While SIAT controls pests, they destroy our own," he added.

To provide for himself, his wife, and their sole child, who is now 5 years old, he mostly relies on his daily catch from the river. However, because of the pollution created by SIAT, he is currently jobless and looking for work. "I sell some (fish) and eat some," he says, recalling the good times before SIAT's pollution, which he discovered began around 2017.

The majority of inhabitants in Elele Alimini primarily drank water from the mini-Igwe and mini-Igbu rivers. While farmers soak and wash their cassava in the river, fishermen catch fish from the river for consumption and to make profit. The reporters' visit to the community proved that some of the company's palm plantation is located directly behind the rivers, close by.

Emeka said: "Between 2012 to 2013 when the company(SIAT) came, everything was okay. We were still fishing in the river. But from 2017 to 2020, everywhere was polluted.

The decline in fish populations in the river prompted some elderly people in the community to look into and identify the source. According to Emeka, they discovered that the chemical SIAT sprayed on their palm trees and the ground to control weeds, pests, and increase yields is the main culprit.

[Sa SIAT nv](#), a Belgian agro-industrial business that specialises in the production of palm oil, is the sole owner of [SIAT Nigeria Ltd.](#) (SNL). A total of 16,000 hectares of land were gathered in the communities of Elele and Ubima for oil palm plantations when the business acquired Risonpalm in 2011 from the Rivers State Government. According to the company's profile on its [website](#), 5,718 hectares were harvested from Elele and 9,513 hectares were harvested from Ubima in Rivers State. Since its establishment in Nigeria and other African nations, the corporation has made several billions of euros while occupying about 66,331 ha for the production of palm oil and rubber. For instance, SIAT group [reported](#) a revenue of 173 million euros in 2021. Unfortunately, despite acquiring the land of host communities and harming the environment in Africa, the firm has not adhered to its Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) commitments .

Farm owners now farmland renters

Sampson Eleonu, 81, was only in primary school when Rivers State of Nigeria Palm (Risonpalm), a state-owned enterprise that later became SIAT, arrived to ask his father, Miniekom, an uneducated man, to surrender his family's land in Elele Alimini under the pretence that he (Miniekom) would profit. He had no idea that this was the start of the misery endured by the residents of Mgbu-Anyim in Elele Alimini in Emohua Local Government Area, Rivers State.

Eleonu said: "They (Risonpalm) came in 1959 and collected all our farmland with false promises, until now, we didn't see anything.

"My father gave a letter to them (Risonpalm) telling them what to do and they signed and agreed but none was done," he added, stating that the discussion took place before the Nigerian civil war, and documents regarding the agreement could no longer be found. Eleonu is now the leader of the Mgbu-Anyim family, one of SIAT host communities.

SIAT claimed on its website that it acquired 5,718 hectares of land from Elele, but Elenwo and other youth leaders in the Mgbu-Ivu family claimed that the company actually took over 6,000 hectares, which is now causing a food shortage and forcing some traders to struggle for a long time to get food to sell and eat. Mgbu-Anyim is made up of three families, and their lands were also collected, but "our own family (Mgbu-Ivu) lands is the highest that was taken. All was collected, nothing is remaining," said Elenwo Joseph, former community youth leader, who interrupted during the interview with Elenwo.

"We are regretting now. It is my father that thought the company will do something(help) but nothing," Eleonu interrupted Joseph Elenwo who was also complaining about the SIAT land grab.

The company took more than what was apportion to them and today, "we are buying land from neighbouring communities to farm," Eleonu, lamented while sitting at the back of his house in Elele Alimini.

Local leaders protested in 2020 and 2021 over the company's land grab and disregard for the host communities after SIAT asked for their bank account information and failed to give them the money they had verbally promised. Joseph said: "During the protest, we requested they sign a fresh agreement because we don't have any agreement with SIAT. Even the rent they claim they have paid, we don't have any document to support that claim.

"I asked my father, he said they gave them money but they didn't sign anything. They asked them to thumb print on a paper and a copy was not given to them. They (my fathers) can't even read."

He claimed that SIAT attempted to bribe each executive member of the 22-member SIAT Landlord Association (made up of youth and parent body) with N5 million in order to end their agitation, but "we refused." After numerous struggles, the corporation and the community finally came to an agreement that is now documented, Elenwo said.

Despite the fact that the MOU cited by the reporters did not specify the annual sum to be paid by SIAT to land owners on a per-hectare basis outside of the company's Corporate Social Responsibility, which includes employment and scholarships, several host communities in Ubima and Elele claimed that the company paid an annual rent of N600 per hectare, which sparked further agitation between the community and SIAT. The N600, along with the accumulated rent that SIAT owes to other families like the Mgbu-Ivu, has not yet been paid. The amount paid by SIAT for per hectare of land is three times less than what community residents typically pay to neighbouring villages to buy farmlands per farming season..

Joseph word: "The company is paying N600 (\$1) per hectare of land, annually. "This is what was negotiated in 1959 and they haven't been paying for it."

"They told us that since there is no document for such payment, we should accept the N600 per hectare. We are yet to receive the money from them.'

Like the Elele community, Ubima—another host community of SIAT faced the same issue of neglect, land grabbing and pollution that has greatly affected farmers. According to Okechuwku Amadi, youth president of SIAT Ubima estate landlord association, it took a decade to pay their land fees after resuming activities on their farmlands.

Amadi said: “After the meeting, they agreed to pay 5 years rent, only for us to receive an alert of N600(\$1)for annual payment per hectare of land for 5 years.

According to Amadi, SIAT transferred the land fee into various community bank accounts and “my community was paid two hundred and ninety seven thousand naira(N297,000).”

“This caused a lot of arguments and issues because we never agreed with them(SIAT) to pay N600 as annual rent per hectare.”

He also accused the company of using their trucks to destroy the road leading to their farmland, consequently, making it difficult for Ubima farmers to access their farm.

Many locals in Elele and Ubima said that despite damaging the source of drinking water, SIAT has failed to uphold its CSR commitments despite promising to provide water, electricity, scholarships, and road building in its memorandum of understanding with host communities. Amadi emphasised that the N100,000 per student in each host community that the company pledged to provide for each session has not been distributed consistently. “They started around 2014 but since then, this is the second batch.”

He added, "The Omademe market in Ikwere is unfinished. Two communities from Etche were electrified, but the power only lasted for two months and there was no maintenance for two years.

Styvn Obodoekwe, programme director for the Center for Environmental, Human Rights, and Development criticised the company's attitude towards the annual payment of N600 (\$1) per hectare, calling it "an act of wickedness" in a state where land is expensive.

“Who does that in this part of the world? Steve asked? "It is too bad! Possibly between 30 and 50 years ago, when land was less expensive, and perhaps at that time they (the community) agreed under that arrangement. At that time, a plot of land was available for lease for N5,000.

Obodoekwe criticised the government for improperly using the Land Use Act to seize peoples' land by force, despite the fact that the Act states that the government is allowed to take any portion of land for the "public interest" and not to seize the land and give it to a private company to profit from. He calls for the amendment of the Land Use Act.

The Nigerian Land Use Act, gives the government the opportunity to exploit people and the process of acquiring the land is lopsided, said human right lawyer, Courage Nsirimovu. According to him, the government uses the Act to favour companies that they (government) have a good relationship with to acquire people's lands under the disguise of the Act.

Nsirimovu said: “The foundation of the land use Act is terribly exploitative that is built against the people,” noting that the Act was based on the federal government appropriating all the crude oil and petroleum products in Nigeria to itself and for the government to have access to the petroleum products; the government has to get the land.

“In Nigeria, land is now owned by the government. You can wake up one day and the government will tell you to pack from your house because they want to acquire the land so the government can acquire any land,” he added.

More grievances

Since SIAT acquired the asset from the State government more than ten years ago, the suffering of the populace has gotten worse as a result of the company's decision to grow their palm plantation at the expense of not only grabbing community land but also contaminating a river that provides drinking water to locals. In contrast to the pH range of 6.5 to 8.5 that the WHO recommends for drinking water, a sample of water collected from a community stream used by residents and sent to a laboratory for testing had a pH of 5.80.

Grace Amadi, a widow, relies on the crops from her farmland to provide for her seven children. When SIAT took all of their acreage and left them with nothing, her husband was still alive. However, as they both

travelled to purchase farm goods from nearby settlements, she and her husband shared the struggle for survival. Her pain grew worse after her husband passed away in 2012.

When SIAT took Amadi's land, neither she nor her husband received any notice from the company. She claims that they learned the terrible information after going to their farmland to farm but learnt the land is now owned by SIAT. She folded her hand, still seeming surprised. "I joined other people to protest at the company's office in Ubima, crying for days but nothing was done," she lamented.

Amadi said: "Before SIAT took my farmland, I had plenty of food to eat. I farm yam, cassava but now, I have nothing to eat again." She recalls that the company took their ten hectares of land.

Amadi now travels to the neighbouring state—Bayelsa, to buy farm produce such as cassava to process and make the local food called "garri". She spent N4,000 for transportation, which she said isn't a fixed price and it depends on the quantity of goods bought.

She said: "If I don't go to Bayelsa to buy cassava, I won't eat," she narrated in her local language. She travelled to Bayelsa twice weekly to buy a few things her money could afford.

"I spent N1,000 to travel to Bayelsa, and paid N3,000 while returning with the cassava. I borrowed all the money used for travelling." According to her, she spent N3,000 to buy a cassava that is in a 50kg cement bag. "Before, it was sold for N2,000 but now I bought it N3,000," she said while waiting for the labourer hired to bring the cassava.

SIAT is known for its notorious activities and lackadaisical attitude towards its host communities. The company cut down its unwanted trees and threw them into rivers leading to the farmlands, Emeka accuse this company, lamenting that "we can't even access our farms, and when they cut down their palm trees, they use it to cover the river where we used to pass to get access to the river, We can't even get fish again," he stresses.

Since SIAT grabbed their farmland, according to Justina Welegbe, a farmer from the Welegba family, they have ceased farming and the firm has not given them any compensation. She plants yams, cassava, cocoyams, corn, and melons, and she sells these crops to buy food—like rice—that their land is unable to produce.

Welegbe recalls: "Buyers come from neighbouring villages and I take them to my farm to show them the cassava and they buy it in "ridge" as we call it. I use the money to pay my children fees.

"But now, if we don't go to buy a farm from neighbouring communities like Rumuekpe and others that are not affected by SIAT, we will not eat," she lamented. She said that the loan she obtained from the private community lenders, known as "meeting Aleto," made the entire acquisition of the farmlands possible.

"Before, we bought a ridge of farmland for N500 and we buy 20 ridge but now it's sold for N2,500 to plant my crops, and we buy only 5 ridge," she lamented stating that she travelled on motorbike through the highway to a Mbiama, a neighbouring community market to buy cassava for processing," she lamented.

According to her, she borrowed fifty thousand naira this week and will be paying an interest of thirty thousand naira latest by the end of December before she would be qualified to take another loan in 2023.

One of the company's well-known practices is building a canal around their palm plantation, preventing farmers from using the local stream to access their farms. The Community members used the river to access farms before SIAT came into existence. The river is the quickest way to get to the river, but according to Welegbe, "SIAT use Mopol (police officers) to chase farmers who use it to access their farms."

"We have work, we don't have a farm," she said, stating that, "before we will use leg (walk) it would take between five to six hours to walk to get to the farm," she said.

She pointed out that the company had polluted the mini-Onua, mini-Igwe, and mini-Igbu rivers, from which the community's members get their water, leading to a shortage of water. According to her, she now purchases a bag of sachet water, also known as 'pure water'.

"The well water we dug in our compound is not good for drinking, so we have to buy a bag of pure water for N150," against the previous amount of N100. "I buy 10 bags weekly(1,500)," she added.

Due to the constant complaint by all the residents in Elele the reporters spoke with who pointed to SIAT as the polluter of the community stream—the only source of drinking water, and the reason for depletion of fish in their river, compelled the reporters to take two samples of water to ascertain the component in the river. Two water samples were taken, one from the community stream (which is described PB on the test result), and the other was PB, the area where SIAT dug their canal to restrict residents from accessing their farmlands. The reporters took the decision to take both sample because residents said both water at some point meets especially when the rivers flows or during the high tide. However, both water samples show the pH is below the [WHO](#) recommended standard of 6.5-8.5pH.

Analysing the test result, Kingsley Nwogbidi, chairman of the Nigerian Environmental Society said that the pH is very acidic and “it's not good for either drinking or any use.” He said that because the levels of chloride ions (CL), nitrate nitrogen (NO₃), and sulphate sulphur (SO₄) are so high, they can negatively impact humans, animals, and marine life.

“The quality of the water is not suitable for drinking or any use,” Nwogbidi, added.

He further noted that if the fertiliser used on the farmland are washed into the community rivers as claimed by community members, “there will be so much pathogenic compound which is not good for aquatic life,” urging the community to reach out to the environmental society for proper professional advice. Research has [shown](#) that fish cannot survive in water below pH 4 .

The Missouri [department](#) of natural resources says Chloride (CL) can get into the environment through fertiliser use, livestock waste, dust suppressants, industries and other inputs and low and high levels can be toxic to fish, and capable of killing trees and plants.

According to the Glenn Research [Center](#), turbidity is a condition caused by suspended solids in the water, such as silt, clay, and industrial wastes. [Research](#) has shown that “fish in turbid water lose weight, and that this weight loss increases with nephelometric turbidity units, proving that long-term turbidity exposure is harmful to growth productivity.”

The test result from Elele contains 7.0 TDS, although the normal range for Total Dissolved Solids (TDS) is 0 to 5. According to [experts](#), one of the common reasons for excessive TDS, which can be harmful to the ecosystem, is agricultural/pesticide runoff. [Studies](#) have shown that too much TDS in a body of water is hazardous to aquatic creatures like fish, amphibians, and macro-invertebrates.

According to various [research](#), the optimum level of Dissolved Oxygen (DO) is above 6.5-8 mg/L and between 80 and 120 percent; however, the laboratory results show that river water (PB) has a DO level of 4.0. According to [Wales Natural Resources](#), "fish and other animals may suffocate and die if oxygen levels in water drop quickly or are too low.

SIAT worker confirms pollution and meagre pay

An employee of SIAT, who asked to remain anonymous to protect themselves from further retaliation from the company, told the reporters that the company utilises chemical fertiliser to maintain the palm plantation, which aids in the growth of the palm fruits and protects them from pests.

Elenwo the executive youth member, accused the company of failing to hire the few indigenous people to work for SIAT, and their employees, including graduates, are paid meagerly despite putting in long hours. A SIAT employee who wished to remain anonymous supported Joseph's accusations.

Our source explained that professional slashers are paid N2,300 per day while the chemical department are paid N2,500 daily, and harvesters are paid based on their work, N30 per bunch that is harvested.

Our source said: "The money is paid monthly. Each day, the company takes records on our work and pays at the end of the month.

"My challenge is that the salary is too poor because of the stress, compared to the increase of food prices in Nigeria. Daily payment is N2,500 but I spent up to N3,000 daily as a family person with kids," our source lamented.

NESREA, a government agency, whose responsibilities include protection and development of the environment, biodiversity conservation, enforcement and ensuring companies comply with environmental laws denied knowledge of environmental pollution in the communities. Zonal Director, Nosa Aigbedion demanded the community to write a formal letter to the agency.

Aigbedion said: "We receive a lot of spurious and unconfirmed claims of pollution frequently only to see that even the complainant sometimes is not even a member of the community. Following that, we sometimes require to get full details of the complaint itself and the complainant.

"Tell the community that if their claims are genuine, they should formally forward a letter to us stating their observations," he said in a WhatsApp message.

All efforts made to reach the company for comment were abortive. Neither did the Public Relations Manager, Lucky Ezihuo respond to our Whatsapp message despite reading it nor was the email sent to the company responded.

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