

Rural Modernity and its Discontents

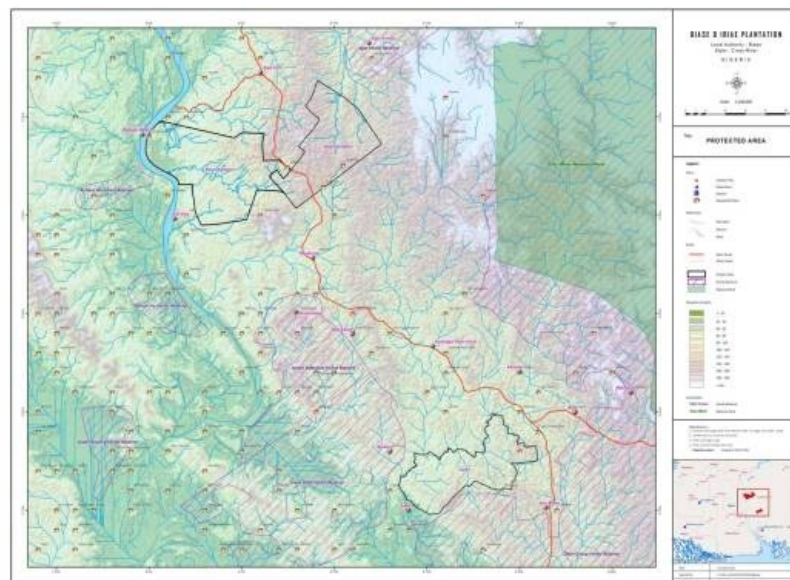
Reflections on globalization, modernity and the 'civilized' African peasant

Wilmar acquires land in Nigeria

The rush for land for oil palm cultivation in the Congo Basin and coastal West Africa continues unabashed. Wilmar, one of Asia's largest agribusinesses has expanded its African oil palm interests, which already include investments in Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Uganda, with the establishment of the wholly owned plantation company Biase Plantations in Nigeria's Cross River State. During a recent privatization round, the company won bids for 3 plantations, covering an area of 19,712 hectares. The plantations include Biase (8,688 hectares), Ibiae (5,561 hectares), and Calaro (5,483 hectares) - see below map.

The three plantations were acquired in 1963 for the purpose of oil palm development. Ibiae and Calaro were developed by the state-owned Eastern Nigerian Development Corporation before the plantations were abandoned in the 1970s. Biase was acquired by the Commonwealth Development Corporation, which failed to develop the land. Much of the land has since been encroached on and used for small-scale farming, which covers approximately one-third the concession area. Although Wilmar has pledged to preserve community farmlands within the concession, considering the degree of farmland fragmentation, long-term conflicts with local livelihood systems is inevitable. Wilmar is, however, currently in the process of gaining RSPO certification for the new plantings. Although, particularly in the context of Nigeria's most biodiverse state, 'Brownfield' developments such as these may be considered preferable from a conservation perspective, the socio-economic trade-offs tend to be disproportionately high. Since abandoned state farms tend not to fall within the customary land domain, few legal avenues for recourse exist. In post-conflict countries such as the DR Congo and Liberia, with large abandoned oil palm and rubber estates, commercial oil palm expansion has faced similar dilemmas.

Wilmar's further enhanced its presence in the Nigeria vegetable oil sector by entering into a joint venture with the Nigerian company PZ Cussons to form PZ Wilmar ltd, which will develop an oil palm refinery, and PZ Wilmar Food ltd, which will be its branded product company. In contrast to other major investments in the region, the company is primarily targeting the domestic market.



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