Land Use Policy 38 (2014) 147–162

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Land Use Policy

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/landusepol

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

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 9 September 2013
Received in revised form 5 November 2013
Accepted 8 November 2013

Keywords:
Nigeria
Conservation
Plantation agriculture
Investment governance
Privatization

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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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.landusepol.2013.11.003

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.

It was not until Independence in 1960, when Dr. Michael Okpara became the Eastern Region's first Premier and declared his 'agricultural revolution' that state wealth creation through the establishment of large-scale state run plantations became an explicit objective (ENDC, 1962). One of the underlying motives was to encourage population movements from congested areas within the Niger Delta to the lesser populated areas of present-day CRS (Uyanga, 1980; Korieh, 2010). The ENDC also became an important tool to garner political support in exchange for employment (McHenry, 1985). During the height of the ENDC in 1966, its landholdings exceeded 60,000 ha; more than 80% of this area located in what is now CRS (Committee on the Management and Financing of Cross River State Estates, 1990). It was also during this early post-Independence period that foreign investors were again able to acquire land, which saw the establishment of large new private plantations by Dunlop (rubber), UAC (oil palm), the Commonwealth Development Corporation (CDC) (oil palm), and the Danish Nigeria Agricultural Company (DANAC) (banana) (UAC, 1956; DANAC, 1957; ENDC, 1962).

When the civilian government was overthrown in a coup and replaced by a military government in 1966, the relationship between the government and the Igbo majority ethnic group of the Eastern Region quickly deteriorated (Steyn, 2003). With the abundance of oil resources in the Eastern Region becoming increasingly apparent during the 1960s, the military government sought to undermine an impending Igbo-led secessionist movement by splitting the Eastern Region into three states (the minority controlled Rivers and Southeastern State, and the Igbo dominated East-Central State); effectively cutting off the Igbo majority from the oil-rich Niger Delta (Udo, 1970; Nafziger, 1983). This resulted in the Eastern Region declaring itself the Independent Republic of Biafra in May 1967, which culminated in a Civil War that ended in January 1970 with the collapse of the Biafra resistance. Disruptions and material damage resulting from the conflict marked the downfall of the region's fledgling plantation economy. All private investors, except for UAC, had by that time abandoned their plantations (various local oral histories, 2012; Personal communications, Plantation Director, Pamol, 2012).

With formation of new states, the ENDC was dissolved and the agricultural assets were transferred to Agricultural Development Corporations (ADC). The ADC in Southeastern State, renamed to Cross River State in 1976, inherited most of the ENDC plantations, including the abandoned Dunlop plantations (Personal communications, Commissioner of Agriculture, 2012). However, being heavily underfunded, poorly managed, and employment decisions continuing to be based on political affiliation rather than merit, the inability of the ADC to generate revenues and to pay wages soon made it both a fiscal and a political liability (Commission of Inquiry, 1986). Although the CRS government was able to sustain the heavily indebted ADC during the oil boom of the 1970s, falling oil prices and rising state deficit led to the dismantlement of the ADC in 1982 (McHenry, 1985). At the time of its demise, this ADC was the largest ADC in Nigeria and the largest public corporation in CRS (McHenry, 1985).

Although the ADC was retained as a corporation, its rubber estates were allocated to a newly formed corporation jointly owned by the state and federal government, Cross River Estates Limited (CREL), and the oil palm and cocoa estates were allocated to the private management company Nigerian Joint Agency Limited (NIJAL) to manage the estates on behalf of the government (Commission of Inquiry, 1986). However, the allocation of the management contract to NIJAL was fraught with irregularities. A Commission of Inquiry charged with investigating the matter concluded in its 1986 report that the terms of contract severely compromised the interests of the ADC by protecting NIJAL from all liabilities, providing a management fee based on the acreage managed, rather than revenue generated, and offering exorbitant salaries to management staff. Furthermore, the report claimed that NIJAL was underreporting revenues and side-selling to UAC. Following the report's recommendations, the government proceeded to rescind the management contract and re-allocate individual estates also under management agreements to other private management companies. However, following the recommendations of another Commission of Inquiry in 1990, which detailed similar irregularities, these estates were eventually repossessed by the state government; many, including CREL that was being managed by the CDC, left behind significant debts (Commission of Inquiry, 1990). While a Committee on the Management and Financing of CRS Estates (1990) recommended that these be partially privatized to minimize their mismanagement, with most companies demanding a majority share and with vested economic and political interests to maintain a *status quo*, no shares in any of the estates were divested. With officials reaping substantial economic gains from re-allocating parts of the estates, there was little incentive to reinvest in and maintenance the estates, which eventually resulted in complete estate neglect (Personal communications, Commissioner of Agriculture, 2012; Personal communications, Former official of the Bureau of Public Enterprises, 2012; Personal communications, Permanent Secretary of Agriculture, 2012).

From empire forestry to strict conservation

The majority of forest reserves in Nigeria were established under British colonial rule, particularly in the period 1920–1930; the Oban Group Forest Reserve, established in 1912, being one of the region's oldest (NFIS, 2012). Most of these forest reserves were established for the purpose of timber extraction, very much based on principles of scientific forestry that characterized the reductionist Russian and European forest management practices of the nineteenth century (Scott, 1998; Barton, 2001; Powell, 2007). This was represented, for example, by concepts such as maximum sustainable yield and annual allowable cut (Adam and Hutton, 2007). In line with the Dual Mandate, in southeast Nigeria these forest reserves were typically established in consultation with local communities (Caldecott and Morakinyo, 1996). Customary rights, relating to hunting and harvesting of non-timber forest products (NTFP), were rarely compromised since these did not interfere with the management of timber resources (Lowe, 1993); individual forest reserve orders detailed the specific types of products that could be harvested.

With the emergence of the plantation economy in the 1950s and 1960s, land for plantation development was typically allocated through a negotiated process, which resulted in plantations generally developing over off-reserve forestland. Nevertheless, this period experienced a profound shift in the quality of reserve management. Where under colonial administration well-defined forestry policies and co-management with traditional authorities protected forests from over-exploitation, the indigenization processes of the 1950s served to undermine established conservation programs (Areola, 1987). The management of forest reserves was consolidated within the regional government, which prioritized the development of wood-based industries and employment generation (Areola, 1987). The allocation of timber concessions and royalty fees soon made forest reserves important sources of government patronage (Aweto, 1990; Lowe, 1993). While such royalties in theory were to be shared with communities, in practice these were largely appropriated by government, resulting in communities increasingly colluding with illegal loggers (Caldecott and Morakinyo, 1996). By the mid 1970s, most forest reserves in Nigeria had been depleted of their valuable timber species, which resulted

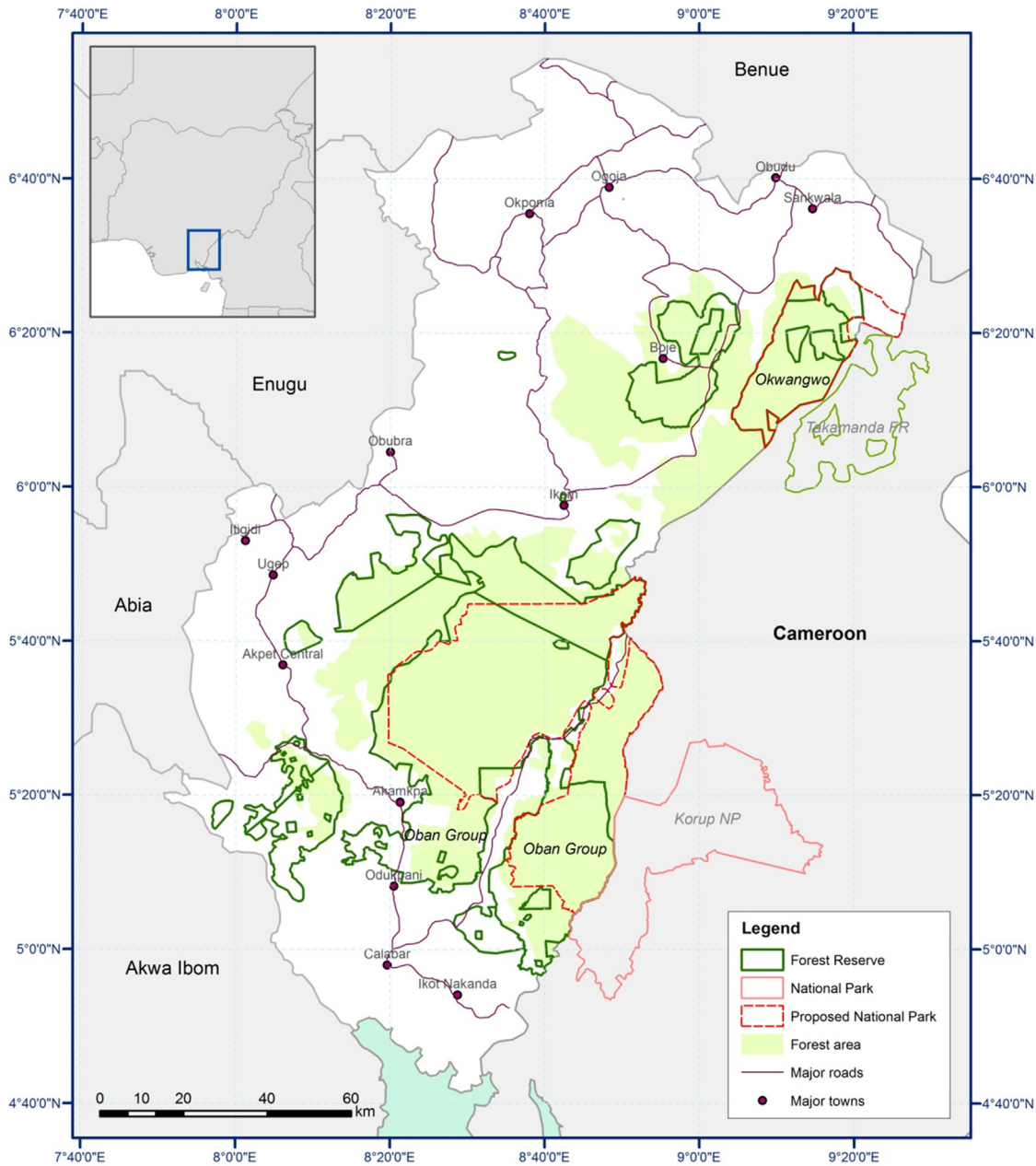

Fig. 1. Map of Cross River State and its protected areas.

Source: Author's representation; protected area boundaries digitized from CRS Forestry Department (1994).

in many forest reserves being converted to pulpwood plantations (Aweto, 1990).[5]

Due to its size and inaccessibility, large parts of the Oban Group Forest Reserve though remained off-limits to logging companies. By the late 1980s, the biological significance of these forests attracted the attention of numerous international researchers and CSOs, including the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) (Caldecott, 1996). In 1988, WWF became directly involved in the management of Cameroon's Korup National Park, which is contiguous with the Ikpan block of the Oban Group (see Fig. 1).[6] With the objective of developing a cooperative regional program, in the same year, WWF, in collaboration with the Nigerian Conservation Foundation (NCF), developed a proposal to protect the Oban Group (Oates, 1999). Since the proposed park was planned to involve a large and costly rural development component, it was to rely predominantly on external funding, particularly from the European Commission (EC) (Caldecott et al., 1989; Oates, 1995, 1999). Although commercial forestry was almost paralyzed by that time, the CRS Forestry Department strongly opposed park establishment as the

[5] In CRS, 25,000 ha of the southwestern parts of the Oban Group were allocated to the state-owned Nigerian Newsprint Manufacturing Company (NNMC) in 1986. The NNMC had converted approximately 10,000 ha, including 3000 ha of closed canopy forest, for planting pulpwood species such as gmelina and pine before abandoning their plantations in 1988 due to capital constraints (Chairman Forestry Commission, 2012, Personal communications).

[6] The Ikpan block constitutes the eastern part of the Oban Group, along the Nigeria-Cameroon border. The Ikpan block is tenuously connected to another large forest area, the Oban Hills, which is largely separated by the MCC Road that links the CRS capital Calabar to Cameroon.

cancelation of most logging concessions would reduce their revenue generating capacity (Caldecott, 1996; Ite, 1998). Therefore, additional technical assistance was proposed for developing the capacities of the Forestry Department in, for example, sustainable plantation management and forest product use (Okali, 1989). Such commitments resulted in strong support from the CRS government (Caldecott, 1996). Moreover, buy-in from the federal government was ensured by the inclusion of provisions to relieve some of Nigeria's large external debt obligations (Caldecott, 1996).

An elaborate park Master Plan, financed by the EC, was completed for the federal government in late, 1989, which simultaneously appeared to serve as an EC funding proposal (Caldecott et al., 1989). Since conservation success was thought to rely largely on reducing human dependence on the forest, the Master Plan involved numerous economic incentives as part of its Support Zone Development Program (ibid). Thirty-nine villages residing on the park's periphery would benefit from various rural development projects, related to, for example, agricultural productivity and alternative livelihoods and the construction of new feeder roads, the provision of educational and health facilities, and a compensation fund (Holland et al., 1989). While most Support Zone communities would lose access to part of their agricultural land and traditional hunting, fishing, and non-timber forest product (NTFP) harvesting areas, these planned interventions had guaranteed the support of most communities (Ite, 1998; Ite and Adams, 2000).

In 1991, the federal government passed a decree making the Oban Group and the Okwango Forest Reserve the Cross River National Park (FRN, 1991).[7] Although WWF proposed new park boundaries that would have ensured the legal protection of most intact forests, including a large off-reserve forest area on the Nigerian-Cameroon border, in the absence of funding to negotiate and survey new park boundaries, the boundaries of the Oban Group Forest Reserve was maintained (Oates, 1999; Personal communications, Director Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) 2012). It was not until 1994 that the EC contract was finalized and management contractors were selected (Oates, 1999). However, when the Nigerian government executed nine political activists in 1995 and it was consequently expelled from the Commonwealth, the EC withdrew all its support to the project (Oates, 1999; Ite and Adams, 2000). Since, the management of the Park has been taken over by the federally administered agency, the Nigerian National Parks Service (NNPS), which, without external funding, is engaged exclusively in park patrols (Personal communications, Director NNPS, 2012). None of the envisioned support zone interventions ever materialized; having led to significant resentment among peripheral communities who lost access to important common property resources and never received any of the promised compensation and development assistance (various focus group discussions, 2012).

Methodology

This paper is based largely on qualitative field research conducted during the period April–May 2012 and August–November 2012. Due to the limited availability of data on the plantation economy in CRS, the first activities under this research project involved archival research and collection of secondary data from relevant ministries in CRS (also to construct the historical background discussion). In order to gain insight into the magnitude and spatial distribution of plantations, the Survey Department in Calabar provided assistance in scanning individual plantation survey plans, which were then digitized by the author through a Geographic Information System (GIS). However, owing to the high costs of accessing survey plans, not all plans have been included.

Semi-structured key informant interviews were subsequently conducted with five agricultural investors, five civil-society organizations (CSOs), 34 government stakeholders across various sectoral ministries and levels of government. Site visits were then made to fourteen plantations located within the vicinity of the Oban-Korup forest block.[8] A Global Positioning System (GPS) was used to collect spatially explicit data on land use systems and to geo-reference survey plans.

At each plantation, focus group discussions were held with 'landlord' communities; in total, thirteen communities were profiled, of which five were 'landlords' of two plantations. In order to capture intra-community dynamics and reduce selection and response biases, focus group discussions were held with three different community groups, which were locally considered to capture most interests. The first group involved the Chiefs and Elders Council, which consists of a village chief, various subordinate chiefs, and prominent elders and is responsible for decision-making, protecting culture and tradition, and conflict resolution. The second group involved 'youths' up to an age of approximately forty-five that are represented by the Youth Council; this council plays an important role in maintaining law and order and mobilizing labor for community development projects. The final group involved women, represented also by their own council, which are primarily responsible for sanitation and health issues. Three focus group discussions were also held with migrant communities residing within the larger estates.

Findings

Privatization of defunct state farms

Privatization process

When Nigeria returned to Civilian Rule in 1999, the federal government was already in the process of privatizing many of its assets. However, it was not until July 2002 that CRS under its first civilian Governor, Donald Duke (1999–2007), made its first concerted efforts at privatization. A nine-person Privatization Council was established to oversee the privatization of all state-owned rubber estates, alongside a hotel, a cement company, a timber processing company, a flour mill, and a meat processing factory (GoCRS, 2002). This marked an important shift from the military command economy to more coherent economic planning and public finance management.

In what was generally considered to be a transparent and competitive process, all the rubber estates were privatized by 2003. The largest estate, CREL, was fully privatized to a Taiwanese-American company Eng Huat, which had been operating a rubber factory in the Delta State since 1979 (see Table 1 for a tabulated overview and Fig. 2 for the locations of select estates around the Oban-Korup forest block). This acquisition included 18,537 ha of undeveloped land that CREL had acquired in 1979. Ikot Okpora and Agoi/Nko were acquired by Pamol, which used to be a subsidiary of UAC (now Unilever) and continues to operate the rubber estate that it acquired in CRS in 1907. In 1997, Unilever sold its share to Dunlop Tyres, which currently holds a 60% stake in Pamol. Biakpan was privatized to a small Nigerian rubber company, Royal Farms. The ONREL privatization was revoked when the investors failed to make payment and in 2006 was sold to Real Oil Mills, owned by the

[7] Okwango is a smaller forest area in the north of CRS and is one of the last remaining habitats of the critically endangered Cross River Gorilla (*gorilla gorilla diehli*).

[8] These estates include Biase, Ikot Okpora, Agoi/Nko, Ibiae, Ayip Eku, Calaro, CREL, Nedu Limited, one Obasanjo Farms estate, three Real Oil Mills estates, and two Dansa Food estates (see Tables 1 and 2 for an overview of estates).

Table 1
Privatization status of Cross River State estates.

Plantation name	District	Year established	Gross area (in ha)	Area planted (in ha) upon acquisition	Crop	Investor	Year of privatization/status
Kwa Falls	Akamkpa	1947	2826	1877	Oil palm	Obasanjo Farms*	2003
CREL-1	Akamkpa	1957	8844	7901	Rubber	Eng Huat Industries	2003
CREL-2	Akamkpa	1979	18,537	0	Rubber	Eng Huat Industries	2003
Ikot Okpora	Biase	1959	6092	518	Rubber	Pamol	2003
Biakpan Rubber	Biase	1962	2584	1605	Rubber	Royal Farms	2003
Agoi/Nko Rubber	Ugep	1963	3915	1693	Rubber	Pamol	2003
ONREL	Akamkpa	1955	4688	1262	Rubber/oil palm	Real Oil Mills	2003/2006
Ayip Eku	Akamkpa	1979	12,411	3606	Oil palm	Wingsong M-House[a]	2008
Calaro	Akamkpa	1954	6398	4977	Oil palm	Wilmar	2011
Biase (former CDC estate)	Biase	1960	8688	0	Oil palm	Wilmar	2011
Ibiae	Biase	1963	5561	2419	Oil palm	Wilmar	2011
NNMC	Akamkpa/Odukpani	1986	25,000	10,349	Gmelina	Negris Group	2012[b]
Boki	Boki	1963	4618	1735	Oil palm	–	Under negotiation
Nsadop	Boki	1964	5411	1280	Oil palm	–	Under negotiation
Erei Oil Palm	Biase	1979	4153	758	Oil palm	–	Unclear
Various cocoa estates (7)	Boki/Ikom/Obubra	1954–1965	15,274	7098	Cocoa	–	Under negotiation
Total			135,000	47,078			

Source: ENDC (1962), Commission of Inquiry (1990); various privatization notices.
[a] These estates were purchased by Wilmar in 2012.
[b] According to the Forestry Commission, a total of 100,000 ha will be allocated to Negris Group within forest reserves, though the precise location is still to be determined.

former Governor of Oyo state, Senator Rashidi Ladoja (who in the same year was also impeached on corruption charges). Though not slated for privatization, the Kwa Falls oil palm estate was also sold to Obasanjo Farms, owned by the then sitting President of Nigeria, Olusegun Obasanjo. Unlike the other estates, Kwa Falls and ONREL were not privatized through a competitive bidding process, which has led many to assume that party politics played an important role.

In 2002, it was decided not to privatize the oil palm and cocoa estates, but rather to allocate these under the CRS Smallholder Scheme to farmers surrounding the estates. This was locally referred to as the 'one man, one plot' scheme. The Ministry of Agriculture leased out between 2 and 4 ha of palm and cocoa against a nominal fee. Recipients would be responsible for maintaining their assigned plots and permitted to harvest and sell the crops at their own discretion. Rubber was prioritized for privatization since it was rarely cultivated by smallholders and, with processing typically taking place on a commercial scale, there were few local off-take opportunities. Oil palm and cocoa, on the other hand, had a well-established market, were processed locally, and have long been cultivated by smallholders. As a result, these were considered important crops from a poverty alleviation perspective, as was recognized by the CRS Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy Document (CR-SEED I) for the period 2004–2008.

In 2008, under a more private sector-oriented governor, the former Minister of Power and Steel Liyel Imoke (2007–present), the Smallholder Scheme was consolidated into the Cross River Agriculture and Rural Empowerment Scheme (CARES). This was a strategy platform for the commercialization of smallholder production systems for oil palm, cocoa, and cassava, and enhancing youth participation in agriculture. Under CARES, undeveloped parts of the government estates were allocated to 'commercially-oriented' smallholders. The government was responsible for clearing the land and providing improved seedlings and the beneficiary would be allocated 10–20 ha for oil palm and 1–2 ha for cocoa under a rent-free lease for 25 years. In turn, beneficiaries would be responsible for managing and maintaining their allocated plot. In 2011, 4120 ha of mature oil palm and 4735 ha of mature cocoa were allocated and 452 ha of oil palm and 1056 ha of cocoa had been planted on the undeveloped plots (GoCRS, 2011).

However, in June 2010, a new Privatization Council was inaugurated that was charged with fully privatizing these estates, signaling a strategic move away from the community-government partnerships that formed the basis of CARES. The government attributed their change of approach to three interrelated factors. Firstly, it was argued that the new administration sought to offload burdensome state assets; the CARES program was considered unproductive and prone to rent capture. Smallholders, government argued, lacked the will and technical expertise to properly manage and maintain their allocated plots. Allegedly, plots were also not allocated on the basis of capacity, but rather on the basis of patronage, which resulted in large numbers of absentee plot owners and rampant sub-letting of plots. Communities and agricultural extension officers estimated that between 70 and 90% of plots were allocated not to landlord communities, but to customary elites, particularly chiefs, local businessmen, and officials within the state administration.

Secondly, the new CRS strategic plan (CR-SEED II) for 2009–2012 placed considerable emphasis on agricultural modernization through adoption of 'best practices' and 'adaptable agricultural investments'; leaving no place for government's direct engagement in agricultural markets.[9] Even the provision of inputs (e.g. improved seedlings and fertilizers) is envisioned to become more market-oriented.[10] In support of these objectives, the Investment Promotions Bureau (IPB) and its One-Stop Investment Center (OSIC) were established in November 2008 to promote and facilitate private capital formation. While never publicly articulated as such, senior officials within the Ministry of Agriculture, IPB, and the Governor's Office were rather explicit about the urgency to bring technical capacity in agriculture to the state through the private sector; arguing that smallholder-focused interventions are rarely successful due to the innate inability of smallholder to adopt modern farming practices. Benefits are instead assumed to trickle down naturally from private sector-led agricultural commercialization.

[9] The Global Competitive Index (GCI) is the theoretical basis of CR-SEED II, which focuses strongly on principles of market efficiency and innovation. "Making agriculture more profitable and productive" was the highest priority on the government's new seven point agenda.

[10] For example, the federal Growth Enhancement Support Scheme (GESS) that provides subsidized inputs to smallholders will be taken over entirely by private sector input traders. The ministry of agriculture conceded that the distribution process has been particularly susceptible to corrupt practices. It is the general perceptions amongst rural communities that any smallholder-oriented interventions largely favors those with political connections (e.g. such as micro-finance schemes and even the World Bank assisted projects).

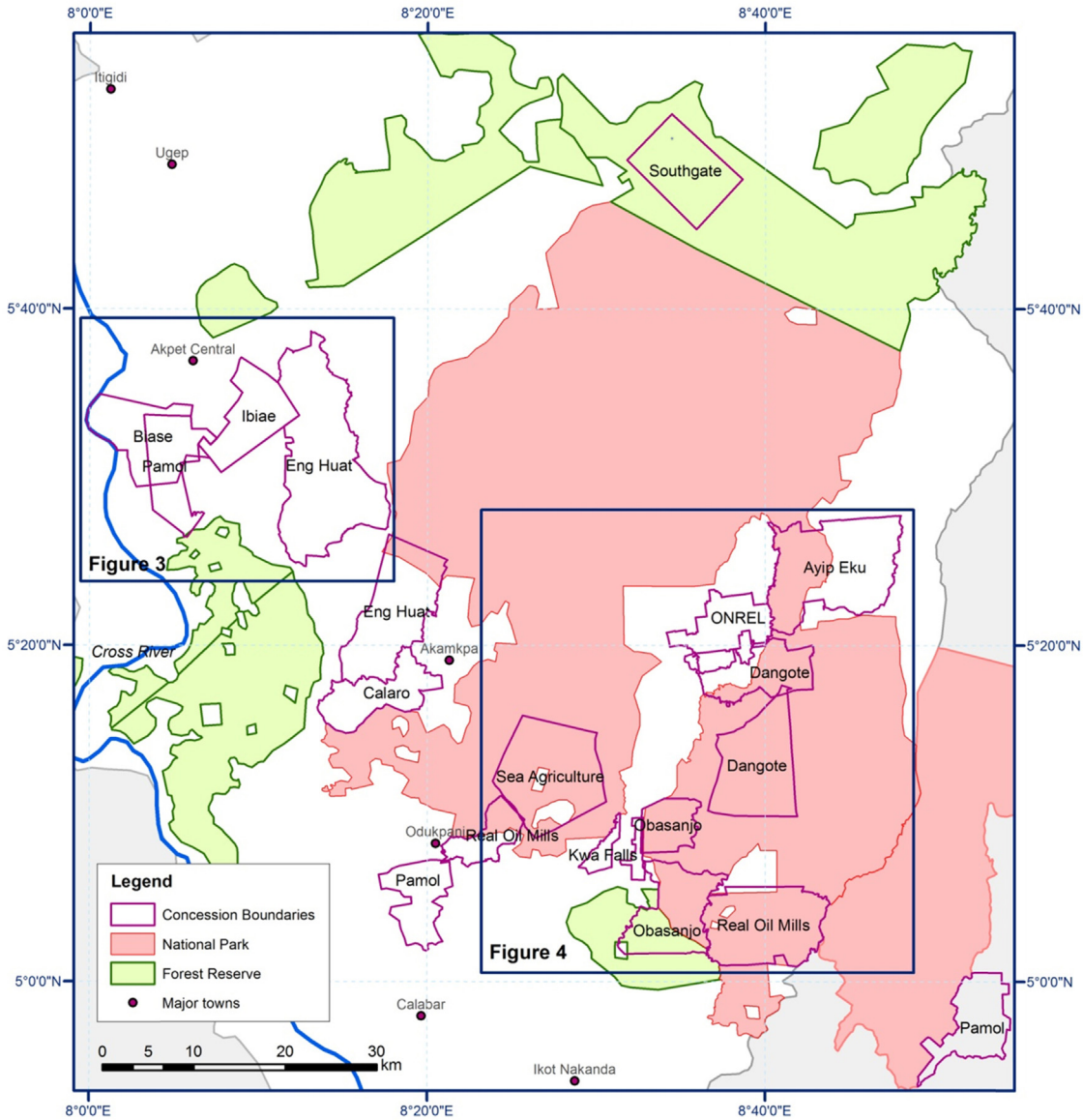

Fig. 2. Distribution of selected concessions.

Source: Author's representation. Concession boundaries from individual survey plans obtained from CRS Survey Department; protected area boundaries digitized from CRS Forestry Department (1994).

The third contributing factor is the state's loss of access to oil reserves. Nigeria and Cameroon have long been entangled in a territorial dispute over the oil-rich peninsula of Bakassi that formed part of CRS. Cameroon took the matter before the International Court of Justice, which in 2002 ruled in favor of Cameroon. In August 2008, Nigeria handed over Bakassi. In order to prevent ceding 76 maritime oil wells in CRS to Cameroon, the federal government allocated all the State's maritime territory to neighboring Akwa Ibom. As a consequence, CRS lost its littoral status and its share in the 13% Derivation Fund that is allocated by the federal government to oil-producing states.[11] With rising budgetary pressures to increase the state's Internally Generated Revenue (IGR), privatization and the private sector, more generally, are perceived as essential sources of revenue. With negligible revenue generated from rural areas, IGR is increasingly being pursued through corporate income tax, tax generated through the formalization of employment, and land rent revenues.

The new privatization exercise, with a much greater focus on 'high capacity' foreign investors, resulted in Singapore's Wilmar, the world's largest oil palm producer, acquiring three oil palm estates in 2011, for a combined area of 19,713 ha. After the state Governor visited Wilmar's plantations in Kalimantan, Indonesia, there were high hopes of replicating this 'success' in CRS. In 2012, the government also assisted Wilmar in acquiring four privately owned estates, covering an area of 26,017 ha; three from Obasanjo Farms and one from Wingsong M-House, which in 2008 acquired the federal government-owned Ayip Eku estate. The two other remaining oil palm estates, Boki and Nsadop, were initially privatized to Belgium's SIAT, but the allocations were later revoked due to SIAT's failure to make payment. In the beginning of 2013, Wilmar was in negotiations to acquire these estates for the cultivation of rubber. The government was also in negotiations with the large US-based commodity trader Ecom Trading to acquire all of its seven cocoa estates.

[11] 13% of national oil revenues are reserved under a derivation fund as compensation to oil-producing states for the environmental costs of oil production.

Implications for indigenous rights

When the ENDC and the various private investors acquired land in the 1950s and 1960s, boundary demarcation was a product of a consultative process. According to oral histories, community consent was actively sought and concession boundaries were jointly identified. This implied that upon establishment, plantations only minimally conflicting with existing farming systems and instead came at the expense of virgin forest, which has long been the primary source of agricultural expansion in the area. Although allocation of leasehold and freehold titles to the land effectively revoked all customary claims, communities continued to be acknowledged as the rightful 'landlords' of the plantations – a terminology that remains in use to this day. Communities were accordingly paid annual royalties (two pounds and six shillings per acre), were granted free access to schools and hospitals constructed at the plantations, and select students were granted scholarships for tertiary education. Owing to the region's comparatively low population density at that time and the limited conflict with existing farming systems, only few households from landlord communities were pushed into plantation employment as a result of loss of access to livelihood resources. Moreover, few households from landlord communities were reportedly interested in plantation employment; generally, such work was considered too poorly remunerated and tedious, and was considered appropriate only as short-term income supplements for 'idle' youths. In line with government objectives, the vast majority of employees were accordingly landless migrants from neighboring Akwa Ibom, one of Nigeria's most populous states.[12] Plantation employment, therefore, was and continues to be socially undesirable, generally associated with poor, landless, out-of-state migrants. In order to minimize conflicts with landlord communities, housing quarters were constructed within plantation boundaries for migrant employees.

When the plantations fell into a state of neglect in the early 1980s and with most plantations only being partially developed (see Table 1), land within plantation boundaries was rapidly encroached upon. As can be observed from Fig. 3, most unexploited land (e.g. forests) in the Ikot Okpora, Ibiae and Biase concessions were converted to smallholder agriculture between 1986 and 2002. While this can to a large extent be attributed to population growth within landlord communities, in Ibiae, Calaro, and CREL, private management firms regularly permitted migrant communities residing within the concessions to cultivate subsistence crops between the rubber and oil palm trees and on undeveloped parts of the estate against a fee. Since this land was inadequate to sustain a growing migrant population, many supplemented this by renting land from landlord communities or from renting land from the Forestry Commission in forest reserves (particularly surrounding the Calaro estate).[13] Since most migrants had moved into the region during plantation establishment, in large part as a result of landlessness, and with most worker camps having developed into self-sustaining communities or having integrated into landlord communities, few migrants migrated back. Rather, most turned to cultivation of subsistence crops to compensate for loss of employment opportunities.[14] The change of livelihood focus of this group no doubt contributed significantly to land-use change processes in and around the plantations during this period – particularly since migrants were not eligible for plots under the CRS Smallholder Scheme.

During the first round of privatizations in 2002, the state government did not consult landlord communities or put in place mechanisms to manage encroachment. Although privatization agreements were signed, with government at that time reportedly interested primarily in short-term economic gains and extending political favors, these agreements did not include any performance requirements. Although investors have no legal obligation to engage or accommodate landlord communities, with the landlord concept thoroughly entrenched in the region, most companies did acknowledge the importance of having a 'social license to operate'; it is generally accepted that one cannot freely operate without the consent of traditional authorities. Although the 1978 Land Use Decree transferred all land-management functions from traditional authorities to the state, chieftaincy institutions in CRS continue to hold important social and political functions. With government largely absent from rural areas and with much of the rural population perceiving state actors to be largely self-serving, traditional institutions offer the most tangible form of political participation. Not only does this sustain the legitimate authority of chiefs, but their capacity to mobilize and influence the opinions of their constituency has also urged politicians and investors alike to carefully foster their chiefly relations.

Government at that time, therefore, preferred not to interfere in these negotiations and urged companies to settle terms privately with relevant chiefs. As such, companies like Real Oil Mills, Pamol, and Eng Huat all consulted the Chiefs and Elders Councils of their landlord communities. These consultations require the company to donate what is termed 'consultation' and 'traditional rites' fees; the former is customarily paid to the community when requesting an audience, while the latter is a contribution to the purchase of drinks and food to celebrate the arrival of a new investor. These fees typically average between two and ten million Nigerian naira.[15] During consultations, community demands are negotiated and a company–community agreement is formulated, which is registered with the Ministry of Justice.

The level of inclusiveness of consultations depends, however, entirely on the Council of Chiefs and Elders. For example, at one of the landlord communities at Pamol's Ikot Okpora estate, negotiations on which conditions to include in the community–company agreement arose out of an intra-community consultation process that involved both the Youth and Women Council. Demands included the payment of 400,000 naira in annual royalties, youth employment, rehabilitation of the primary access road, and scholarships for tertiary education. All income derived from the plantation is allocated toward a community development fund (e.g. for the construction of a town hall and school maintenance), which is co-managed by the three Councils. In contrast, at the sole landlord community at Real Oil Mills' ONREL, the Council of Chiefs and Elders did not liaise with or seek the consent of any of the other community groups. The Youth and Women Council were completely unaware of how much was paid in consultation and traditional rites fees, the nature of the community–company agreement, or how income derived from the plantation is used. According to the Chiefs and Elders Council, the only provision in the agreement

[12] According to the 2006 Population Census, the population density in Akwa Ibom is 587 persons/km^2, compared to 133 persons/km^2 in CRS. Although information on workforce composition is not maintained, companies and communities estimate that between 80 and 90% of the plantation workforce originates from Akwa Ibom.

[13] In the 1980s, under the Taungya system of plantation forestry, large forest reserve areas had been allocated by the Forestry Commission to farmers. When plans to develop large gmelina plantations were soon shelved, the Forestry Commission continued to allocate forests for farmland expansion; this rather as a source of income, which it shares with landlord chiefs.

[14] The population residing within the plantations is estimated at 5949 in Calaro, 3615 in Ibiae, 2496 in ONREL, and 1186 in Ayip Eku (derived from GoCRS, 1991). DIN (2012) estimated that in the community of Mbarakom, on the outskirts of the Calaro estate, approximately 76.1% of the community's population of 3648 are migrants.

[15] On September 1, 2013, one dollar was equivalent to 164.1 naira.

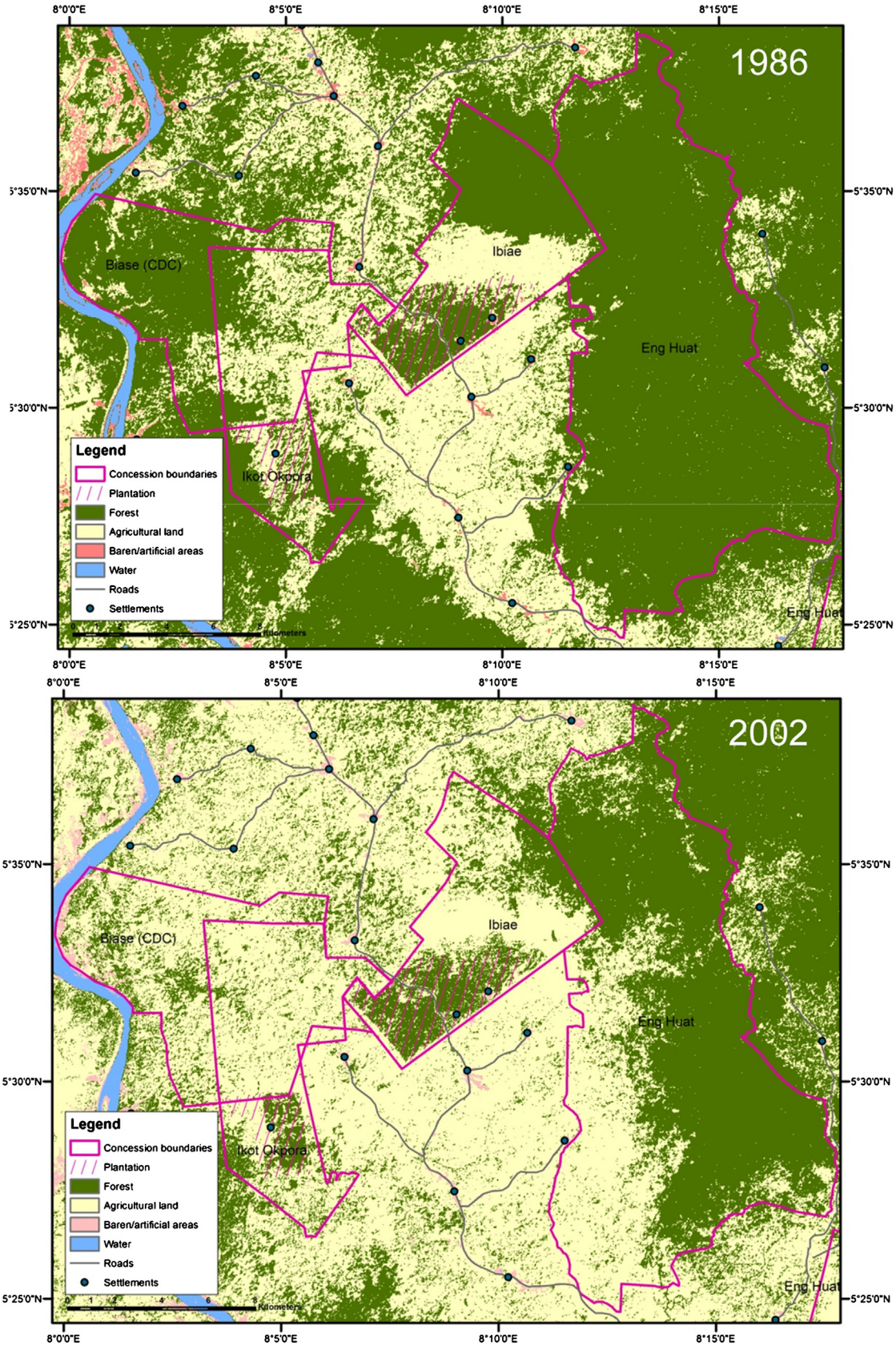

Fig. 3. Land-use change 1986–2002. *Notes*: Agricultural land includes both fallowed and cultivated land, which could in some instances also include secondary forests. Forests include exclusively closed canopy tree cover.

Source: Author's representation based on NASA Landsat 5 satellite imagery.

is the payment of 5 million naira in annual royalties. According to the women and youth groups, these monies had never been used for community development purposes – illustrating the risk of elite capture in the community–company negotiation process.

While the government played no active role in community negotiations during the first round of privatization, during the second round in 2010 involving the privatizations to Wilmar, the government played a more prominent role; it was argued because large investors like Wilmar are insufficiently attuned to local custom and the state now has a dedicated entity to support investor establishment. The IPB, on behalf of the Privatization Council, invited all the thirteen Councils of Chiefs and Elders to the CRS capital, Calabar, to seek consent. While most of the Councils claimed to have been apprehensive about the privatization, particularly since many chiefs were CARES beneficiaries, government assurance that Wilmar would adopt preferential hiring policies, contribute to schools and hospitals, and provide access to clean water and electricity compelled all Councils to consent to the privatization. Three million naira per community in consultation and traditional rites fees were accordingly accepted. Again, the use of these monies differed greatly between communities; in two of the five sampled landlord communities these were used in their entirety for community development purposes, while in the other three these were appropriated by community elites.

The agreed-upon terms were to be incorporated into the Privatization Agreement between Wilmar and the Privatization Council in lieu of a community–company agreement. However, by the end of 2012, despite repeated requests by landlord communities, Wilmar and the government refused to disclose the terms of the Privatization Agreement that had been finalized in May 2012. Wilmar claimed that since its agreements are solely with the government, it is not in a position to accommodate community concerns. However, when the researcher eventually managed to secure a copy, it was observed that the only contributions required of Wilmar toward to landlord communities was one-time scholarships to two individuals per landlord community and the payment of annual royalties[16]; none of the provisions related to infrastructure development were included.

While there are risks associated with the formulation of community–company agreements in the absence of oversight, this illustrates, on the other hand, also the potential consequences of the government 'representing' the interests of communities. Particularly in the context of prominent investors like Wilmar, it is questionable whether agencies such as the IPB charged with facilitating and promoting investment are in a sufficiently neutral position to engage in such negotiations. Co-optation of government actors also appears to be a problem; with, for example, a personal aide of the Governor and a senior official within the Ministry of Agriculture being employed by Wilmar as 'consultants'. Additionally, the increasing fiscal imperative to promote private sector investment creates distortionary incentives, which in this context are prejudiced against smallholder interests.

Despite community negotiations, encroachers and migrant communities have not been accommodated to a meaningful extent in any of the estates – even for completely undeveloped estates (e.g. the Biase and Eng Huat estate – see Fig. 3). Besides lack of legal rights, this highlights the limited consideration for competing claims during the negotiation process and thus the weak representative and fiduciary capacity of chieftaincy institutions. Most companies have also argued that since the government is contractually obliged to ensure the privatized land is "free from encumbrance" (as per the Privatization Agreements) and chiefs have formally endorsed them they bears no responsibility for accommodating displaced migrants or any other forms of land loss. The only case of compensation payment was for the appropriation of 1100 ha of unexploited land on the Ibiae estate that had been allocated under leasehold to CARES farmers (which is the only type of land use that constitutes a legal claim since these land allocations were governed by leasehold contracts).

The rehabilitation of 'defunct' estates, therefore, entails widespread displacement of smallholder production systems. For example, in the four estates depicted in Fig. 3, it is estimated that the extent of community farmland comprised within plantation boundaries is equivalent to the farmland of between 5200 and 7800 households.[17] Since in most communities land proceeds are appropriated by customary elites, besides opportunities as plantation laborers, there are few mechanisms through which affected households can claim redress. With plantation labor continuing to signify downwards social mobility, employment is merely viewed as a temporary activity for those not productively engaged. Even though CRS increased its minimum wage substantially in 2012, according to employees, many companies circumvent these requirements by relying on short-term casual labor and hiring through labor contractors (thereby paying between 50 and 70% of minimum wage).[18] Since better remunerated, permanent, employment is limited to more highly skilled workers, most landlord communities indicated that 'socially desirable' jobs were typically out of reach. Most companies also expressed a preference for migrant workers due to their greater 'efficiency' and lesser sense of 'entitlement'. Companies indicated that because of sufficiently large pool of willing Akwa Ibom laborers (including new migrants), they did not need to rely on the indigenous workforce; also explaining the high level of casualization.

Despite the availability of labor opportunities, well-established migrant communities residing within the estates face some of the greatest challenges. At Wilmar's Ibiae and Calaro estate, for example, all old camps were in the process of being destructed, with only those migrants rehired by the company under permanent contracts permitted to move to the new worker camp within the estate. With an abundance of also new migrant workers, this, however, constitutes only a fraction of the population of more than 9500. Households unable to regain employment were offered 'retirement' packages to aid in relocation back to Akwa Ibom, which ranged from US$ 5 to US$ 50. Since many of those households resided in the camps for between 40 and 50 years, do not have entitlements to land, and after many generations have lost most social ties to Akwa Ibom, many seek to take up residence in landlord communities and rent land. This will undoubtedly serve to exacerbate local competition for land and forest encroachment. With customary land as a result becoming an increasingly valued commodity and with limited suitable farmland available, livelihood reconstruction will largely become a function of financial and social capital differentials. Some women group also expressed concerns that rising land competition could jeopardize the security of 'women plots'.[19]

While the Ministry of Agriculture is now attempting to promote local spillovers by transforming CARES into an outgrower

[16] While the Agreement did not specify the royalty rate, according the Ministry of Lands these would be fixed at 200 naira per hectare per annum.

[17] This is based on 15,611 ha of agricultural land comprised within concession boundaries (calculated from Landsat 5 imagery). According to focus group participants in the area, the average household owns between 2 and 3 ha of land (including both cultivated and fallowed land).

[18] Besides Pamol that claims to hire only permanent workers, between 60 and 80% of the workforce at interviewed companies was non-permanent.

[19] In CRS, most women farm their own plots. Many women contend that these plots protect household food security, since 'male plots' are often more market-oriented and proceeds are rarely used in the household's interest.

support scheme, the success of such a scheme can be debated. For example, since oil palm producing communities are engaged in numerous activities along the value chain (from harvesting the fresh fruit bunches to retailing crude palm oil), merely supplying investors with fresh fruit bunches would undermine smallholder value addition. Most households, therefore, regarded commercial plantations as a competitive threat rather than a new marketing outlet. Since most oil palm smallholders cultivate the Dura variety, which has approximately half the oil content of the improved Tenera variety that is cultivated on most estates, some companies also indicated that processing smallholder bunches was also too expensive. Moreover, in the rubber sector, interviewed companies were uninterested in participating in such a scheme, arguing that creating off-take opportunities for smallholders would only serve to stimulate estate theft.

The only legal avenue through which impacts associated with dispossession can be addressed is through the environmental and social impact assessment (ESIA). The Environmental Impact Assessment Decree of 1992 stipulates that when an agricultural project develops more than 500 ha or involves the displacement of more than 100 households, prior to commencing any land development activities, an ESIA that evaluates the project's potential social and environmental impacts and proposes appropriate mitigating measures is to be conducted. However, since this process is considered too expensive and time-consuming, in CRS these legal requirements are in practice not enforced. Wilmar was, for example, the only company to have conducted an ESIA, though mostly in order to fulfill obligations under the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO).[20] However, since the ESIA failed to acknowledge the existence of migrant groups and the need for their resettlement and without quantifying the magnitude of dispossession, the veracity of the process can be disputed. Moreover, with three employees from the Ministry of Environment hired as consultants to conduct Wilmar's ESIA, the neutrality of the ministry responsible for appraising the report can also be questioned.

Although associational life is comparatively strong in CRS, few stakeholder groups have, however, contested displacement or dispossession. Youth groups within the landlord communities of ONREL and Ayip Eku, for instance, claimed that the Chiefs and Elders Council prohibited them from rebelling against the investors over poor labor conditions and failure to contribute to community development. In these communities, the co-optation of chiefs and community deference to their authority served to quell collective action. Wilmar's adherence to RSPO has though offered civil society new avenues for contesting rights infringements not recognized under Nigerian law. For example, for Wilmar's Ibiae estate, the RSPO solicited public inputs under its New Planting Procedure (NPP). The CRS-based advocacy CSO Rainforest Resource Development Center (RRDC), representing the four Ibiae landlord communities, submitted a complaint in which it argued that Wilmar contravened a number of RSPO principles related to community consent, consultations, and compensation (RRDC, 2012; Ibiae Landlord Communities, 2012). However, within three weeks, without the resolution of any of the outstanding substantive issues, the chiefs formally distanced themselves from the complaint (Ezak, 2013). According to the RRDC, chiefs were either compromised or were subject to state intimidation; a number of threats by the CRS police force had also been directed at the Chairman of the RRDC.

[20] The RSPO is a multi-stakeholder certification scheme with the objective of promoting palm oil production in accordance with social and environmental sustainability standards.

Greenfield developments

Establishment process

In an effort to rehabilitate the ailing Nigerian oil palm sector, the federal government imposed a ban on the bulk importation of crude and refined vegetable oils in 2001; Nigeria became a net vegetable oil importer by the 1970s. The consequent national deficit and the concomitant surge in price and demand for locally produced palm oil provided an important stimulus for private investment into the sector (USDA FAS, 2003; PIND, 2009). Since the ADC estates were at that time earmarked for the Smallholder Scheme, the rising interest from the private sector for oil palm cultivation was accommodated by bringing new land into production.

In CRS, a number of private investors, most of which targeting the oil palm sector, managed to acquire large areas of land for Greenfield development. Before the first privatization round in 2003, the only large privately held plantations were those of Pamol. Most new plantations were established along the MCC Road that bisects the Cross River National Park (Fig. 2). With comparatively high rainfall intensity and low rainfall variability, this area is especially suitable for oil palm cultivation. The largest areas of land have been acquired by Sea Agriculture, a Nigerian-owned startup, Real Oil Mills, Obasanjo Farms, Dansa Food, a wholly-owned subsidiary of one of Africa's largest business conglomerates, Dangote, and by a joint venture between the state oil company Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) and the Brazilian energy company Petrobras for the production of palm-based biodiesel (see Table 2). The Obasanjo Farms estates were purchased by Wilmar in October 2012.

Under colonial administration, the state ceded all land to traditional authorities. The 1978 transfer of land management functions to state and district government, however, significantly changed the legal basis for land possession in southern Nigeria by reducing customary interests in land to non-transferable 'rights of occupancy' (Francis, 1984). The Decree was borne out of the "necessity to harmonize the land tenure system in the country. . . and the difficulty of government in obtaining land for development" (Otubu, 2008, p. 130). The consequence of the act is that all 'undeveloped' land (e.g. fallowed land and common property resources) is put at the complete disposal of state and district government and any other rights can be extinguished to obtain "control over land required for or in connection with economic, industrial, or agricultural development" (Article 51(1-h)), without requiring consultations or consent and for which compensation is only granted for 'unexhausted improvements' (e.g. crops, planted economic trees, settlements, and other structures). The government then allocates a Certificate of Occupancy, which has a standardized duration of 99 years. In rural CRS, commercial enterprises pay 300 naira per hectare to the government and non-commercial actors 50 naira (GoCRS, 2003).

In all land acquisitions since 2000, except Nedu Limited, the Ministry of Agriculture was responsible for identifying suitable land for investors. In determining land availability, the ministry is, however, not guided by a procedural framework or any formal social or environmental criteria. Once suitable land is identified, government and investors typically meet with community chiefs to seek their consent; the only exception being the land for the two Obasanjo Farms estates, which were forcibly acquired (though later also required chiefly endorsement).

Nedu Limited was one of the few larger investors who bypassed government completely and directly engaged the landlord community. Unlike government-led acquisitions, land boundaries were jointly determined through a process that also included the Youth and Women Councils. While chiefs cannot legally allocate land for investment, for smaller estates this continues to be common practice, with proceeds going directly to the community rather than

Table 2
Large-scale Greenfield plantations.

Project developer	Location	Year established	Gross area (in ha)	Crop	Note
Pamol	Odukpani	1907	4229	Rubber	Used to be almost 6500 ha in extent. Parts have been acquired for urban expansion. Entire estate is developed.
Real Oil Mills	Akampka/Odukpani	1988	2975	Oil palm	Was purchased in 2005 from Pamol. Approx. 1270 ha converted.
Obasanjo Farms	Akamkpa	2002	7805	Oil palm	Purchased by Wilmar in October 2012. Approx. 4740 ha converted. Additional 930 ha converted outside concession boundaries.
Obasanjo Farms	Akamkpa	2002	2986	Oil palm	Purchased by Wilmar in October 2012. Approx. 1095 ha converted.
Sea Agriculture	Akamkpa	2003	11,246	Oil palm	Considered a speculator. Was sold in 2012 to an unspecified buyer. No land developed.
Real Oil Mills	Akamkpa	2004	9700	Oil palm	Approx. 300 ha converted. Two saw mills within estate.
Dansa Agro-Allied	Akamkpa	2005	5621	Pineapple	Commenced in 2012. 450 ha converted – plans to develop entire estate by 2016.
Dansa Agro-Allied	Akamkpa	2006	9313	Oil palm	To commence in 2013. None converted – plans to develop entire estate by 2018.
Unknown	Ikom/Obubra	2006	7756	Oil palm	Acquired by the government, but unclear who it has been allocated to.
NNPC/Petrobas	Obubra	2007	50,000	Oil palm	Yet to commence development.
Nedu Limited	Akamkpa	2008	3300	Oil palm	Approx. 1000 ha converted. Has not obtained a Certificate of Occupancy.
Southgate	Ikom	2012	7241	Cocoa	Certificate been revoked. The government is searching for a new land.
Total			122,172		

Source: Various CRS official gazettes; individual surveys plans; field research; investor questionnaires.

the government. On the western periphery of the National Park, a number of senior civil servants were also observed to have acquired land in this fashion, though largely for estates ranging from 200 to 500 ha. However, these acquisitions were rarely formalized; a process that requires the consent from the Governor, the approval of a survey plan by the Surveyor General, the allocation of the Certificate of Occupancy from the Land Use and Allocation Committee at the Ministry of Lands and Housing, and the payment of ground rents. The high costs associated with this process often acts as a deterrent for smaller investors.

In contrast to many of the privatized estates, only Nedu Limited and Real Oil Mills developed company–community agreements with landlord communities. For Nedu Limited this entailed the payment of compensation to individual farmers and at Real Oil Mills this entailed a onetime contribution of five million naira (again, community groups are unaware how this was spent) and the construction of a borehole. In all other cases, no community–company agreements were made. Most large companies tend to prefer that the government use their right to eminent domain to acquire land. According to the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Lands and Housing, the acquisition is then the responsibility of the government and costs associated with excessive community demands tend to be spared. When the government is involved, negotiations with chiefs tend to be more political and clandestine than when investors directly engage communities.

In similar vein to the privatizations to Wilmar, in case of strife, investors who acquired land through government tend to relieve themselves from responsibility. In the case of the Dansa pineapple farm, for example, the Commissioner of Agriculture was forced to appease the chiefs over the refusal of Dansa to enter into a community agreement. The acquisition of Obasanjo Farms also led to long-lasting disputes between one of its landlord communities, represented by the RRDC, and the government over failure to seek chiefly endorsement, pay consultation and traditional rites fees, and compensation for loss of farmland. The investor turned to the government to resolve the situation. Not unlike the RSPO complaint against Wilmar, following a closed-door meeting between government and chiefs, without any of the community's substantive demands being met, the chiefs, nevertheless, issued a communiqué formally endorsing the company. Failure of the community to contest this decision highlights community deference to chiefly authority. With one of the chief's sons subsequently appointed as the company–community liaison, further points at underlying processes of co-optation.

While in many of the early privatized estates the absence of the government in the management of community relations prompted companies to engage communities more directly, the more heavy-handed role of the government in Greenfield acquisitions arguably fueled greater elite capture in the alienation process. Due to the opacity of these negotiations, it is difficult to ascertain how chiefs were persuaded to consent to alienation. However, in the communities that were researched, skepticism as to the benevolence of chiefs appears to be endemic, with most chiefs also exhibiting a marked sense of entitlement to land and its proceeds. Rent capture is locally rarely a condemned practice; with most community groups considering such gains as legitimate privileges of leadership positions. Upwards social and economic mobility is, therefore, widely associated with one's ability to effectively maneuver within and capitalize on patron–client networks.

Implications for the Oban-korup block

Except for Obasanjo Farms, lack of resistance to these Greenfield plantations can also be attributed to the limited conflict with community farmland. Like the expansion of plantation agriculture in the 1950s and 1960s, the surge in demand for land in the 2000s has chiefly come at the expense of forests. This is predominantly due to the reluctance to acquire land over which communities have legally protected claims. On the one hand, this is to prevent the political ramifications of conflict with landlord communities, while on the other, it is also to minimize the costs associated with payment of compensation. Since forestlands do not involve 'unexhausted improvements', the Land Use Decree (1978) does not protect land users from loss of access to NTFP resources. Moreover, no compensation is payable for the alienation of agricultural land located within forest reserves or the National Park; even when that land has been allocated to communities by the Forestry Commission, such as in the case of the farmland located within the Ekinta Forest Reserve and the National Park that have been allocated to Obasanjo

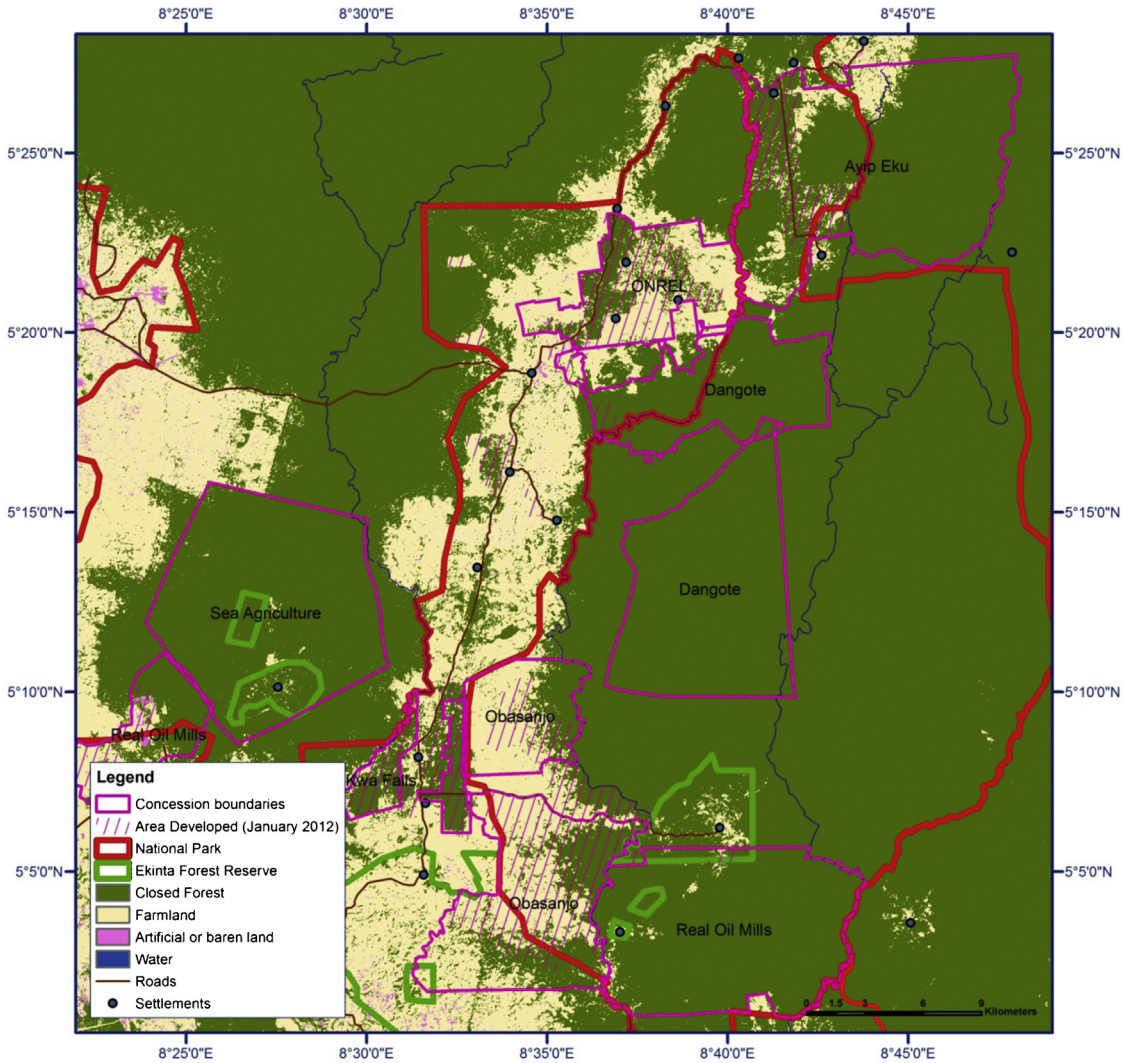

Fig. 4. Land use along MCC road in 2002.

Source: Author's representation based on NASA Landsat 5 satellite imagery (30 m resolution) and spot image satellite imagery (5 m resolution).

Farms. Most communities were observed to be highly receptive to agricultural investors, arguing that ample forestland remained for agricultural expansion and NTFPs. With many communities also embittered about the loss of rights under the formation of the National Park, little environmental consciousness is apparent.

The allocation of predominantly forestland to plantations does, however, expose a number of irregularities in the alienation process. For example, at least 10 of the acquisitions are located within forest reserves and the National Park, with 57,855 ha conflicting with protected areas; many of which comprising dense, closed-canopy forests located within important connectivity zones of the Ikpan block (Fig. 4). Land for the two Dansa plantations, two Real Oil Mills plantations, two Obasanjo Farms plantations, Sea Agriculture, a pending expansion of Wilmar's Calaro Estate, and the allocations to Negris Group comprise large part of the Cross River National Park. Southgate is located within the Cross River South Forest Reserve. However, there is some disagreement as to the boundaries of the park, with most officials claiming that the boundaries proposed by WWF in 1991 are the unofficial boundaries (see Fig. 1); although the National Parks Decree of 1991 gazetted the entire Oban Group Forest Reserve as the National Park. Nevertheless, the concessions that then fall outside the unofficial boundary are still located within forest reserves. Legally speaking, for a concession to be allocated within a protected area, the land first needs to be de-reserved (in the case of forest reserves by the CRS Forestry Commission) or degazetted (in the case of the national park by the federal government). Since this has not happened for any of the plantations, all development activities by the investors are technically illegal. In the context of the recent shift from royalties (e.g. from logging) to loyalties (e.g. REDD+), investor activities are too in contravention of the state's deforestation moratorium.

Moreover, as per the Land Use Act (1978), the acquisition of land by the state requires that it be published in the state's gazettes. Only for the 7756 ha estate acquired in 2006 has this happened. As with the privatized estates, none of the estates had either finalized the ESIA process. Real Oil Mills commenced their ESIA process in 2004, though failed to complete the process. The Ministry of Environment conceded that it did not enforce the Environmental Impact Assessment Decree (1992) and was focused more on waste management in CRS's major towns.

The lack of adherence to the Land Use Act (1978), National Park Decree (1991), Environmental Impact Assessment Decree (1992), and Cross River State Forest Law (2010) can clearly not be attributed to lack of oversight or unawareness of land use conflicts, considering the high degree of awareness of all relevant state agencies and ministries. This included key actors of agencies

responsible for enforcing environmental management laws, such as the Commissioner of Environment, the Chairman of the Forestry Commission, the Director of the NNPS, and the Deforestation Taskforce. A senior official within the Ministry of Environment gave a surprisingly frank interpretation. He asserted that conservation was not a priority for the ministry and that the failure of companies and government alike to consult civil society (e.g. through the gazetting and mandatory ESIA-related consultation process) was to avoid excessive public scrutiny. Therefore, the Real Oil Mills' ESIA activities were stalled before any public engagement activities could commence. According to numerous CSOs and even senior official within government, the lack of enforcement and transparency can be attributed to the complicity of many commissioners and directors who have made substantial personal gains from allocating land.

While many of these acquisitions date back to the Donald Duke era, to date the current Governor has revoked only one allocation. Following a campaign against Southgate by the RRDC and the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), the Governor, who reportedly personally approved the allocation, revoked Southgate's Certification of Occupancy – this, according to the CSOs, after both the Commissioner of Environment and Commissioner of Agriculture attempted to pressure the CSOs into dropping the case. Public embarrassment in light of the pending allocation of US$ 4 million by UN-REDD in support of the state's REDD Readiness activities was thought to be a key contributing factor. Besides the three campaigns by RRDC, CSOs have rarely brought government to account for the many irregularities in the allocation process. For a large part, this can be attributed the opacity of the process. None of the major environmental CSOs in the state claimed to be aware of any other concessions or protected area overlaps; even the state's vibrant media has failed to address these issues. Limited CSO capacity and will to advocate on politically sensitive issues could also be seen as contributing factors. For example, four of the five major environmental CSOs in CRS were either dependent on government funding or engaged in government partnerships. Two of the most state's most active anti-deforestation activists now also fill key positions within the state administration, with one being appointed as the Chairman of the Forestry Commission and the other as head of the Deforestation Taskforce. That neither had formally addressed these irregularities illustrates either their limited capacity to exert influence within existing political structures or complicity.

The director of the NNPS, for example, claimed that meddling in such activities would jeopardize his job security.[21] Such concerns are widespread, with many senior government officials openly expressing their reluctance to interfere into the affairs of other officials. Since many key officials are frequently appointed on the basis of politics, not merit, and often observed to be rotating between ministries, internal accountability tends to be undermined. For example, the current Commissioner of Environment was formerly the Commissioner of Agriculture; the Commissioner of Agriculture was formerly the Chief of Staff; the Commissioner of Lands was formerly the Surveyor General; the Surveyor General was formerly employed in an unrelated post within the oil industry; and the current Director of the NNPS was formerly a banker. As in the case of the Commissioner of Environment, this could result in situations where a commissioner responsible for facilitating a land deal is later responsible for regulating that land deal.

The newly appointed Surveyor General sought to streamline the allocation process by developing a modern GIS department capable of developing a land bank; with the objective of minimizing land use conflicts. He could not find the necessary support from other departments and claimed to have faced strong internal opposition. He argued that such a process was not in the interest of other stakeholders since that would be "too transparent" and, therefore, would reduce the opportunity for individual rent-seeking activities. This illustrates that reforms that threaten to circumscribe existing structures of power and control will face significant resistance by a deeply entrenched bureaucratic class.

While individual gains are likely to play a prominent role in explaining allocation decisions, some CSOs also point at the political aspect. For example, directors of three of the five largest agricultural investors in the state, Real Oil Mills, Dansa, and Obasanjo Farms, like Duke and Imoke, are all powerful members of the right-wing People's Democratic Party (PDP) that has ruled the country since taking over from the military regime. Besides Olusegun Obasanjo and Rashidi Ladoja, Dansa's Aliko Dangote, also a PDP supporter and the Chairman of Nigeria's Economic Advisory Committee, is the country's richest, and arguably, the most economically powerful individual. Dangote is also a major source of funding for both presidential and governorship campaigns. At Obasanjo Farms, employees also bemoaned the use of the company to reward political support. Since Obasanjo established his CRS oil palm estates soon after his administration passed the bulk import ban of oil palm further raises questions over misuse of authority. Moreover, a number of former employees are now employed in senior positions within government. This tenuous separation between public and private interests further compromises the capacity to effectively regulate agribusiness.

Discussion and conclusions

In CRS, the rising participation of the private sector in agricultural production has come at the expense of both indigenous rights and conservation. This, however, is not simply a result of indiscriminate land alienations and a narrow focus on investment promotion. The state is disinclined to alienate customary land over which communities have legal claims and, therefore, right to compensation. As a result, the state has exclusively allocated land that falls under their own administration, regardless of the magnitude of land use conflicts, such as defunct state farms and land within forest reserves and national parks. Since most state farms have only been partially developed and have long experienced heavy encroachment, privatization entails widespread displacement and dispossession. Although the state, technically, has no legal obligations to encroachers and can easily hide behind an 'illegality' argument, considering the state's direct role in promoting in-migration in the 1960s, increasing local dependence on the estates through CARES, and long periods of estate neglect, from a human rights perspective, it is arguable that the state bears some responsibilities toward managing the socio-economic implications of privatization. Its failure to accommodate smallholder interests reflects not only state neglect for local rights, but also, more generally, its investment-centric development strategies and its discriminatory ideologies regarding 'inefficient' smallholder production systems.

The interactions between state, agribusiness, and customary elites play an important role in shaping these outcomes. With chieftaincy institutions continuing to wield substantial political influence, the state and investors alike seek to legitimize their (lack of) actions and absolve their responsibilities by empowering and co-opting customary elites. This serves to quell local resistance and to alleviate the potential political ramifications of dispossession. The apparent ease with which chiefs are compromised reveals not only the patrimonial nature of chieftaincy institutions, but also the limited capacity of their constituency to demand accountability. This can be ascribed primarily to the strong political and, arguably,

[21] This was especially in reference to Dangote. He argued that rather than canceling the concessions, those parts of the park should be de-gazetted instead.

economic alliance between customary elites and ruling coalitions that since colonial times have served to entrench and protect existing power and control structures. This, in turn, severely undermines the capacity of CSOs to mobilize communities and engage in rights-related campaigns.

The tendency to avoid customary land and instead target forestland for Greenfield expansion highlights the potential leakage of provisions to protect customary rights (albeit merely through compensation requirements in this context) without effective environmental protection mechanisms. Despite the state's conservation rhetoric and strict conservation laws at both the state and federal level, in practice these policies and laws are only selectively enforced. Where state failure to adhere to land laws would be quickly exposed (particularly by opposition parties), the merits of biodiversity protection do not appear to be sufficiently institutionalized, neither in government nor in society. With protection of Oban-Korup largely a product of expectations of large unfulfilled external aid flows, rather than domestic conservation pressures, Park protection enjoys little political support. This raises very real concerns over underlying motives and the capacity of the state to transition to a low-carbon economy. Like the Greenfield plantations, REDD+ is merely another strategy to capture economic gains from an 'underexploited' resource.

The CRS government should though be credited for developing a coherent long-term economic vision to address its need to generate internal revenues. In line with federal policy and Washington Consensus orthodoxy, this has involved structural economic reforms to reduce the state's direct participation in the agricultural economy, which has removed important sources of patrimonial accumulation. However, findings suggest that the state's new private-sector oriented policies may neither serve the interests of the state's agrarian population, nor the environment. This can be attributed to the fact that coalitions of local elites merely realign and reorganize around new economic structures to perpetuate and consolidate established lines of inclusion and exclusion. In similar vein to oil rents, the state's increasing reliance on fiscal revenues generated through agribusiness will continue to undermine the quality of societal representation. With the agricultural sector in CRS monopolized by a small number of politically and economically powerful companies, political futures are increasingly shaped by coalescing with private sector actors. With accountability structures undermined by the blurring of private–public boundaries, conflicts of interests, cronyism, and opacity, CRS's new development strategies, therefore, fail to adequately reconcile competing interests. This raises very real questions about the virtues of private-sector led development in frontier markets, especially where this serves to extend local state power.

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