

Migrant Farmers and Environmental Degradation: A Study of the Cross River State Forest Reserves

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines the degradation of the Cross River State Forest Reserves. A field assessment was done in selected communities: Ekprika and Oban in Akamkpa Local Government Area, and Okoyong in Odukpani Local Government Area, all in Cross River State. The Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) technique was used to gather information. The study reveals that the degradation of the Forest Reserves is significantly due to the activities of migrant farmers settling in the forest, bulk of which is from Akwa Ibom State. Several sources of farm migration were identified. A weighted matrix ranking method was used to assess the severity of each source. Slavery, farm labour and Domestic help were identified as the most important sources of farm migration to the Forest Reserves. Tourism and inadequate farm-land (in Akwa Ibom State) were ranked second, while health was ranked third. The paper recommends, among other things, intensification of agricultural programmes in Akwa Ibom State to help stop or abate further migration to the Forest Reserves.

Keywords: *Environmental Degradation, Natural Resources, Agricultural Intensification, Depletion, Forest Reserves.*

INTRODUCTION

With the discovery of oil and its subsequent boom in the 1970s, and

consequent divestment from agriculture in Nigeria, agricultural systems became uncoordinated. For those who had the courage to remain in the agricultural sector, land tenure system and land titles, especially in Southern Nigeria, impeded their efforts in effective agricultural intensification (Iniodu, 1997). In order to meet the growing food and agricultural raw materials requirements, agriculture, again, needed to be intensified.

In line with the objective of intensifying agriculture, government established key agricultural programmes such as the Agricultural Development Projects (ADPs), Operation Feed the Nation (OFN), Green Revolution (GR), among others. The main aims of these programmes were to regenerate agriculture and stem the rate of migration of agricultural labour force in search of employment opportunities from rural to urban areas. In 1978, Government enacted the Land Use Act, which entrusted all land titles in Nigeria to it. With this Act, Government could acquire land anywhere in the country for any purpose for the welfare of the entire citizenry.

Even with the Land Use Act, land tenure system in Nigeria remained almost as it was before the law. Farmers were only able to expand cultivated areas or intensify agriculture if they could acquire more farmlands either by inheritance, rent or outright purchase from others. This extremely

inhibited agricultural productivity. Resulting from this was the migration of farmers from original settlements to new settlements in search of farmlands (Udo, 1974). Udo (ibid) found that farm-farm migration has been more rampant in the eastern part of Nigeria where population density is relatively high.

Increased population in families has put more pressure on land such that many families do not have enough land space for housing and agriculture. Land disputes have been rampant among family members, between families, villages, local governments, and even between State Governments (Udo, 1990; Mendie, 1991).

The use of eminent domain power of government in land acquisition and the lure of compensations for land acquired by government continue to make significant inroads into the supply of arable land. The same is true of the competing uses of land arising from deforestation, industrialization and its attendant development of industrial estate, and the ever-growing urban/sub urban sprawl, all of which make considerable inroads into the fixed supply of arable land (Agboola, 1979; Olayide, 1981).

Land tenure system is seen by some people to be the most serious problem on the supply side of land resources in this part of the country (Udo, 1974; Famoriyo, 1980; Ogunfowora and Olayide, 1981). Apart from seriously limiting the supply of land to natives as well as foreigners, land tenure system influences agricultural production through its effects on:

- (i) Farmers' incentives and motivation as well as the 'receptivity' of farmers to technical innovation;
- (ii) The catalytic effect of permitting greater results to be obtained from other agricultural development programmes.

- (iii) The magnitudes of capital investments in agriculture; and
- (iv) Farm size and layout (Ogunfowora and Olayide, 1981).

Those who could not acquire land outrightly went into leasing land from those who have surplus to spare. Some farmers opted for migrating to areas where there were unused farm resources to either rent and cultivate, or forcefully occupy and cultivate (Udo, 1974; Agboola, 1979; Famoriyo, 1980).

Given the land tenure system, modern mechanized cultivation seems impossible. Over 70 percent of Akwa Ibom citizens are involved in agriculture, any increase in population leads to an increase in the demand for farmland which induces farm migration (Mendie, 1991).

Nigeria has a landmass of 92 million hectares. Of this, forest occupies a third (30.67 million hectares), and 2 million hectares of this remain in reserve protecting watersheds, controlling soil erosion, recycling minerals and nutrients, influencing climate, and serving a habitation of game species etc. (Uhom, 2000). The Cross River State Forest Reserves account significantly to the total forest reserves of the Nation. Statistics reveal that for over two decades, not less than 400,000 hectares of the forest reserves is deforested yearly (CBN, 2003:153)

The incessant deforestation of the forest reserves is largely attributed to the farm-farm migration which is more rampant in the eastern part of the country. (Udo, 1980; Mendie, 1991).

The realization of obvious farm-farm migration in Eastern Nigeria, and its consequent impacts on the environment, through poor land - Use practices, gave vent to the study.

Objectives of the study are to:

- (i) Identify the causes of farm migration from the neighbouring Akwa Ibom State to Cross River State;
- (ii) Explain the causes of the large scale unsustainable usage of the Cross River State forest reserves by the migrant farmers;
- (iii) Determine the damaging consequences of the activities of migrant farmers on the Cross River State forest reserves.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Area

The study concentrated on Akwa Ibom and Cross River States. Akwa Ibom State has an appropriate land area of about 8,142km², which supports a population of about 2.69 million people (NPC, 1991). Conversely, Cross River State with a population of about 2.13 million has a landmass of over twice the size of Akwa Ibom State.

While Cross River State soils are richly endowed with fertility, Akwa Ibom State soils are generally light-textured and strongly acidic, formed mainly on coastal plain sands (Nwa, 1991). Over 70 per cent of the populations of these two States are engaged in agriculture. However, small scale and subsistence farmers dominate the sector. Major crops produced in the area include cassava: (*Manihot esculentum*), yam: (*Dioscorea spp.*), maize: (*Zea mais*), cowpea: (*Vigna unguiculata*), banana: (*Musa sapientum*), plantain: (*Musa paradisiacal*), rice: (*Oryza sativa*), tomatoe: (*Lycopersicon esculentum*), vegetable: (*Telfaira occidentalis*) and pineapple: (*Ananas comosus*) (Agboola, 1979; Udo, 1990).

Methods

A field assessment was done in specific centres. The criteria for choosing such as centres included high concentration of migrant farmers, and locations in the forest reserves. The

following communities (centres) were selected: Ekpriko and Oban in Akamkpa Local Government Area, and Okoyong in Odukpani Local Government Area, all in Cross River State.

The Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) technique was used to gather information. Specific PRA tools employed for data collection included: Semi-Structured Interview (SSI); Focus Group Discussion (FGD); Key Informants Interview (KII) and Participatory Observations (PO). The PRA technique was selected, because it is not only a tool for gathering information about a people by outsiders without deep interactions, (as with questionnaires or RRA); but it allows the researchers (outsiders) and the communities (insiders) to participatively interact in a number of ways to evolve decisions (Chambers, 1983; Burkey, 1993). The informal and semi-structured nature afforded the study the opportunity to interact adequately with the communities in a manner that assured them of confidence and dignity to present issues the way they were and not the way they wanted the researchers to know.

A conceptual matrix methodology was thereafter employed to analyze the mass of data that were collected from field interaction.

Historical Trend of Farm Migration to Cross River State

Early farm migration from Akwa Ibom State to Cross River State could be traced to the early twentieth century when the two States were under a common jurisdiction. Calabar, the current capital of Cross River State was the rally centre for the colonial European traders, missionaries and the then colonial government who used it port as landing and departing depot

Activities here attracted people from the thickly populated southern fringes of the then South-Eastern Region to move to Calabar for opportunities. Trip to Calabar and its pleasant environs encouraged migrants (especially farmers) to move beyond Calabar municipality into the hinterland.

Adepoju (1975) and Agboola (1979) agreed that people undertake farm-farm migration mainly for economic purpose, whereas Oguneye (1987) saw the determinant of farm-farm migration as a resolve to set a new settlement in a more conducive environment. However, the latter assertion lacks explicitness in explaining the nature of conduciveness; whether it be economic, social, religion, or...

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Health, religion, education, social issues, inadequate farmlands, tourism, outright purchase, salary, farm labour and domestic help were found to be the causative (impelling) factors to farm-farm migration to Cross River State. The variables are explained thus:

- (i) **Health:** Many of the migrant farmers in the sampled communities migrated there in search of herbal and traditional medical treatment for various ailments. After treatment, some of these people decided to stay behind and farm instead of going back into their old conditions and environment.
- (ii) **Religion:** Some migrant farmers fled to these communities to seek refuge as a result of religious persecution in their original homelands, as they were compelled to abandon some of their cultural and traditional practices. As the host

communities harboured them, even at the end of such persecution, some decided to stay because of enough farmlands and proceeds they made from farming.

(iii) **Education:** Some teachers who went to these communities to teach were given large farmlands by the indigenes as a token of appreciation and assimilation, and they (teachers) earned additional subsistence income from farming. With this additional income, some of these teachers resisted transfers out of these communities to other communities where cultivable farmlands were scarce. When finally these teachers-farmers were transferred, some, still, refused such transfers, rather resigned and opted for farming which gave them relatively higher incomes. In other cases, some people that went to these communities as students after schooling, instead of going back home, decided to retire to farming, because of high income.

(iv) **Social Issues:** Some migrant farmers (males/females) went into these communities in order to keep their love relationship with own spouses or to help render services to the family of such.

(v) **Inadequate farmlands:** Inadequate farmlands coupled with high population density increased the propensity to migrate. The need for improved and intensive farming, amid inadequate farmlands, compelled some farmers to migrate to where enough and adequate farmlands could be available for farming purposes.

(vi) **Tourism:** Some of the farmers migrated to these communities out of adventure, especially in festive periods to watch and/or take part in the communities' traditional

plays. Some of the adventurers spent sometime in the communities after the festive periods; and in some cases, it resulted in settling there.

Outright Purchase: In some cases, migrant farmers purchased farmlands outrightly from the original owners. As such they claimed full rights to such farmlands, and settled there.

Slavery, Farm Labour and Domestic Help: Careful participatory observation in many of the migrant farmers' settlements, especially when probing their history, revealed that many of them went into these communities as slaves, farm labourers or domestic helps. Some indigenous families in the communities in the past had the habit of assimilating patriotic and hard working slaves, farm labourers and domestic helps into their households. By this action, they (slaves, farm labourers and domestic helps) were given land rights, usually in remote parts of

the communities, which had today become reservoir of wealth resources. These slaves, farm-labourers and domestic helps, in many cases, went back home to bring their folks and moved into the interior areas given to them to establish homelands that have turned out to be villages today. The study, for instance, revealed that, Obio Ukwok, a village settlement in Akamkpa Local Government Area of Cross River State was established by *bona fide* indigenes of Akwa Ibom State who also have the same village (Ukwok) in Ini Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State. Apart from this community, many others are headed by Akwa Ibom indigenes who are fully titled and recognised as chiefs.

Table 1 is a display, in matrix format, of respondents' views on causes of farm migration to Cross River State. (The causes of farm-farm migration are ranked using weights).

Weighted Rank Causes

Groups	Health	Education	Religious	Social Issues	Inadequate Farmland	Tourism	Outright Purchase	Slavery, Farm Labour/ Domestic Help	Total
Traditional Chiefs	60	50	80	40	40	70	10	50	
Migrant Farmers	30	10	20	10	50	20	80	70	
Traditional Birth Attendant	80	10	10	40	50	40	20	70	
Youth Organisations	10	70	30	50	50	30	40	60	
Women Groups	50	20	40	50	80	40	70	80	
Citizen Farmers	20	10	40	50	50	70	10	80	
Elderly People	60	40	60	50	60	70	60	80	
Medical Practitioners (Orthodox & non orthodox)	80	20	70	40	40	60	50	50	
Teachers	40	80	60	60	20	40	80	80	
Total	430	310	410	390	440	440	420	620	31460
% of Total	12.43	8.96	11.85	11.30	12.72	12.72	12.14	17.47	100
Rank	3	7	5	6	2	2	4	1	

Source: Field Survey

A weighted matrix – ranking was adopted to analyse the data. After intensive interactions in the three survey communities, the following interest groups were identified: traditional chiefs, migrant farmers, traditional birth attendants, youth organizations, women groups, citizen farmers, elderly people, medical practitioners (orthodox and non-orthodox) and teachers. Members of these groups, individually and collectively, identified, in all, eight variables as sources of farm-farm migration to Cross River State.

It was imperative to probe further to know the level of severity of each of the variables the respondents identified as the sources of farm migration. To undertake this task, a weighted matrix ranking method was employed. Weights (in tens) ranging from 10 to 80 were selected to depict the level of severity each causative variable has on farm migration. Specifically, weights attached were in the order 10, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70, and 80. 80 represented very important, while 10 represented least important cause. Weights were chosen by respondents according to how they perceived the severity of such causative variable. The reaction of respondents, in terms of weight selection, is as shown in Table 1.

Ranking the result from the weighted matrix table, the survey identified slavery, farm labour and domestic help as the most important variables causing farm-farm migration to Cross River State. Tourism and inadequate farmland were ranked second. Health was ranked third, while outright purchase and religious persecution were ranked fourth and fifth

respectively. Social issues was ranked sixth while education was ranked seventh and last.

DISCUSSION

The consequences of migrant farming, according to Udo (1974), Agboola (1979), and Famoriyo (1980), could be divided into two broad categories: the positive and the negative consequences. These consequences from the people's perspective are discussed in the following section.

Positive Consequences

- (i) **Increase in Community's Food Production:** Increased number of immigrant farmers in the communities has led to increased toiling of the land of the communities. This has resulted in increase in food and agricultural production. For instance, the current reputation of Odukpani Local Government Area (of Cross River State) as one of the major garri-producing areas in Nigeria, has been made possible by migrant farmers from North-Eastern Akwa Ibom State.
- (ii) **Improved Household Economy:** The bulk of the migrants who, hitherto, had remained jobless and farmless in their indigenous homes can now cultivate to sell and earn income. This tends to reduce economic dependency and poverty level, and make them self-subsistent, and even labour employers. In many communities visited, migrant farmers contribute even more than indigenes to development purposes of their host communities.
- (iii) **Inter-ethnic co-operation and linkages:** Situations in these communities are such that

encourage easy and close understanding and co-operation between the different ethnic peoples. Inter-ethnic marriages which are common between the migrants and indigenes have helped in cementing, to some level, ethnic differences and misunderstandings between the two States.

- (iv) **Abatement of Language Barrier:** The language barrier between some neighbouring communities in Cross River and Akwa Ibom State is gradually waning as different peoples live and interact together. This cohesion makes them comprehend themselves and their activities quite easily and encourages them to speak one general language - *Efik*. Moreso, new generation children learn both their parent's language(s) and the language of their host communities/migrant farmers.

Negative Consequences:

- (i) **Unsustainable Farming Practices:** Migrant farmers in Cross River State do not practise bush fallowing, for instance. With ever-increasing population, even to a fixed land, they are occupying (mostly illegally), this important land-replenishing system had been ignored. The soils are cultivated yearly and continually without application of manure or fertilizer in many cases.

Udo (1974) noted that these tenant-farmers who invaded reserved land areas developed a tendency of mining the soils, thus gradually and substantially depleting the fertility and structure of the soil. The forest resources

were also affected because of the short fallow periods that did not allow for forest regeneration. In consequence, Udo (1974) observed that part of Okoyong had since been converted from a thick forest into an open oil palm bush.

- (ii) **Deforestation:** Deforestation due to farming in Cross River State forest reserves is severe. The practice is that farmers have to clear bushes, cut trees and burn them, before farming. In order to expand cultivable land portions, farmers fell a lot of trees and burn forests. The impact of bush burning has been a devastating depletion of fauna, flora, timber and non-timber products. Many medicinal herbs and trees had been destroyed and even extinct in many cases. Traditional herbalists in Oban (Cross River State) complained that now they have to access medicinal herbs from farer interior bushes and forests than before when there was not much deforestation.

In a survey carried out in Akwa Ibom State in 1995, the Northern Akwa Ibom Swamp Resources Development Study (NAISRDS, 1995) reported the under utilization of the swamp resources of Akwa Ibom State and improper articulation by farmers and other stakeholders as motivating factors that encouraged farm migration from the North Eastern axis of the State to the nearby richly endowed lands of Cross River State. The NAISRDS was established to articulate initiatives for agricultural intensification and development in Akwa Ibom State, in order to reduce the incidence of farm migration to Cross River State, and farm-urban

migration within the State – Akwa Ibom. Several land conservation and management methods have been used (NAISRDS, 1995). In Cross River State, Bisong (1994) reported similar land conservation mechanisms. Both studies, carried out respectively and independently in Akwa Ibom and Cross River States, agreed on the following land conservation methods: fallowing, mulching, cover cropping and contouring. The use of these methods by farmers strictly depends on the commitment of the farmers or the cost they would incur if they fail to apply the method(s). NAISRDS (1995) also reported that the fallow period is rarely maintained in many places in Akwa Ibom State. In another study, Pretty (1995) proffered reasons why farmers may not be conserving soil (and water), as:

- (a) farmers may be unwilling to invest in conservation measures if economic costs of conservation are greater than the expected benefits; particularly if the future is uncertain, such as if political instability or conflict threatens the future, or if security of tenure is uncertain;
- (b) they may not be conserving because of misguided efforts of earlier soil (and water) conservation programmes.
- (c) farmers may be short of labour for construction or maintenance as a result of a decline in population, that is, rural-urban migration by labour in search of better income earning opportunities, or rising labour costs;
- (d) they may lack appropriate knowledge or skills, especially, if they have resettled in, or migrated to, new areas.

- (e) Farmers may be so responsive to policies encouraging increased food production that they simply ignore conservation.

However, Mendie (1991) observed that in Akwa Ibom and Cross River States, farmers have been grappling with erosion. Pretty (1995) assented that, despite the fact that indigenous system of soil and water conservation is widespread, well adapted to land conditions, and can persist for long periods, and are capable of supporting dense populations, soil erosion continues to be a problem through out the world. Pretty (op cit.) added that indigenous systems of soil conservation may be insufficient to prevent agricultural lands from continuing to lose productive soil, water and nutrient resources.

(iii) **Family Disintegration:** Many families have been disjointed, even disintegrated as a result of farm migration. Some husbands/wives abandon their wives / husbands and children for farm settlements. Many migrant farmers identified in these communities remarried either from the host communities or amongst themselves. However, many of them had history of previous marriages and families before the current situation.

(v) **Conflicts:** In recent times, conflicts, tensions and acrimony have been roaring in the communities hosting these migrants' settlements. Indigenes of the host communities argue that the migrant farmers are not only illegally occupying the land, but are settling and unsustainably mining their conserved forest

areas. Government agencies on the other hand argue that the migrant farmers have no rights to the government conservation they are occupying. The migrants, however argue that they are *bona fide* owners of the land; and since others are not using the land, they have the right to cultivate it. These contending arguments brought conflicts in many communities between the indigenes and migrant farmers. In some cases it resulted in loss of lives and properties on either part.

CONCLUSION

The activities of migrant farmers, although seriously undermined and underestimated in recent times, have had serious influence on the rural economies of many communities. The Cross River State case is particularly because of its place in the rain forest belt and the enormous resources that have been put in place by government, donor agencies and non-governmental organisations, to nurture and sustain the few remaining natural rain forest ecosystems in the world. Continuous intensification of soil mining and forest depletion, as done by the migrant farmers, signals total loss of the forest, as observed by ODA (1995). There is need to consider seriously the causes of farm migration as outlined in this paper. Also, this paper has noted objectively that the majority of migrant farmers in the Cross River State Forests are from Akwa Ibom State. Continuous migration could be stopped or abated if agricultural intensification programmes are supported effectively in Akwa Ibom State.

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