

IMPACTS OF OKOMU OIL PALM COMPANY ON UDO COMMUNITY

FORM 1976 - 2015

BY

Akpojovwo Goodluck

ART2100504

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

FACULTY OF ARTS

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AKPOJOVWO GOODLUCK

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**A PROJECT SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND
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CERTIFICATION

This is to certify that this project was written by AKPOJOVWO GOODLUCK with Matriculation number ART2100504 in the Department of History and International Studies, university of Benin, under my supervision.

Prof. J.C Nwaka
Project Supervisor

Prof. J.C Nwaka
Head of Department

Date. _____

Date. _____

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to God Almighty and my Parents “Mr and Mrs Thomas Akpojovwo”, whose unwavering love and belief in me anchored this journey through every storm and triumph.

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the impact of the Okomu Oil Palm Company on the socio-economic and environmental development of Udo Community in Ovia South-West Local Government Area of Edo State from 1976 to 2015. Agriculture has historically been a major driver of Nigeria's economy, with the oil palm industry playing a central role in employment generation, food production, and industrial growth. As one of the leading agro-industrial firms in the country, Okomu Oil Palm Company has significantly shaped the development trajectory of its host community since its establishment in 1976.

The study adopts a descriptive and analytical approach to assess both the positive and negative impacts of the company's operations on Udo Community. Findings reveal that the company has contributed to economic growth through job creation, infrastructure development, and corporate social responsibility initiatives. However, these benefits are accompanied by challenges such as land disputes, deforestation, environmental degradation, and the displacement of local farmers whose livelihoods depend on subsistence agriculture. The research further highlights the emergence of social tensions, including conflicts over land ownership, allegations of inadequate compensation, and resistance from affected community members and civil society groups. Despite these issues, there remains a gap in comprehensive academic analysis of the long-term effects of agro-industrial activities on host communities in Nigeria.

This study concludes that while Okomu Oil Palm Company has played a vital role in stimulating economic activities in Udo Community, its operations have also generated significant environmental and social costs. It therefore recommends the adoption of more sustainable and inclusive development strategies, improved compensation mechanisms, and stronger regulatory frameworks to balance corporate interests with community welfare.

CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Introduction

Agriculture has historically played a critical role in Nigeria's economy, contributing significantly to employment, food production, and industrial development¹. One of the most prominent sub-sectors within agriculture is the "oil palm industry" which has been a major source of revenue and economic activity, particularly in the southern regions of the country².

Nigeria was once the world's leading producer of palm oil before Malaysia and Indonesia overtook it in the 1960s. The government later encouraged private investment in the sector, leading to the rise of large agribusiness firms such as Okomu Oil Palm Company.

The Okomu Oil Palm Company, established in 1976, is one of Nigeria's leading agro-industrial firms specializing in the large-scale cultivation and processing of oil palm and rubber³, cultivating thousands of hectares of land in Edo State. The company operates within Udo Community in Ovia South-West Local Government Area of Edo State, an area that has experienced various socio-economic and environmental changes due to the company's presence and activities⁴.



Figure 1: Aerial view of OKomu Oil Palm Company's plantation, illustrating its large-scale agricultural operations..

Source: Okomu Oil palm company Plc, circa 2010.

The presence of Okomu Oil Palm Company in Udo Community has been met with both positive and negative impacts. On one hand, the company has contributed to local economic growth through employment opportunities, infrastructure development, and corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives⁵. On the other hand, concerns have been raised about land disputes, deforestation, environmental degradation, and the displacement of indigenous farmers whose livelihoods depend on subsistence agriculture⁶. These contrasting impacts make it necessary to examine the

company's role in shaping the community's development from 1976 to 2015.

The establishment and expansion of Okomu Oil Palm Company have significantly altered the economic, social, and environmental landscape of Udo Community. While the company has provided employment and stimulated economic activities, local residents have also faced loss of farmlands, environmental degradation, and social conflicts arising from land ownership disputes⁷. In recent years, allegations of corporate exploitation, inadequate compensation for displaced farmers, and environmental pollution have sparked resistance from local communities and civil society organizations.

However, despite these issues, there has been limited academic research on the overall impacts of Okomu Oil Palm Company on Udo Community. Existing studies focus either on the general economic contributions of oil palm companies in Nigeria or on environmental concerns in isolated cases. This study seeks to fill this gap by providing a comprehensive analysis of how Okomu Oil Palm Company has influenced the economic, environmental, social, and political aspects of life in Udo Community over a period of four decades (1976–2015).

Aim and objectives

This research aims at examining the Impacts of Okomu Oil Palm Company in Udo community, Edo state, Nigeria. From 1976 to 2015. The study also aims at shedding light on the lives of the people of Udo community before the establishment of Okomu Oil Palm Company.

Objectives

- 1 To analysis the lives of the people of Udo community before the establishment of Okomu Oil Palm Company.
- 2 To examine the positive impact of Okomu oil palm company in Udo community.
- 3 To identify the Negative impact of Okomu oil palm company on Udo community.
- 4 To assess the Social and Cultural changes brought about by the presence of the company in Udo community.
- 5 To add to the existing body of knowledge on the impact of agro- Industry in the development of rural areas.

Scope Of Study

This study will specifically examine the impacts of Okumo Oil Palm Company in Udo community, Edo state , Nigeria. The study will cover the period from 1976 to 2015 which marks the establishment of OKomu Oil Palm Company to 2015 , allowing for an in depth analysis of its long term effects. The research will assess how the company’s operation have influenced the local economy, environment and social structure of Udo community.

Furthermore it will shed light on Udo community before the establishment of Okomu Oil Palm company. The study will involve various stakeholder, including ; “Okomu Oil Palm company managed and staff , Udo community members and leases and local government officials”.

Literature review

A.C. Ojemade and I.O. Uwubanmwun, in their work *“Expansion of Oil Palm Plantations in Nigeria: Social and Environmental Impacts”*⁸ published in 2010; critically explores the implications of the rapid expansion of oil palm plantations in Nigeria, focusing specifically on the social and environmental impacts on host communities and natural ecosystems. As Nigeria continues to pursue economic diversification, agriculture particularly oil palm cultivation has been promoted as a

viable path to rural development and national economic growth. However, this paper highlights that while oil palm expansion contributes to government revenue and employment, it also presents significant challenges that disproportionately affect rural populations.

A central theme in the study is the conflict between economic development and community well-being. While oil palm plantations have generated income and created jobs, the authors argue that many of these jobs are poorly paid, insecure, and do not offer long-term empowerment for locals. Moreover, the expansion of plantations has often involved the acquisition of large tracts of communal land, sometimes without proper compensation or consultation. This results in land dispossession, leaving many community members without access to their ancestral farmland or traditional livelihoods.

The study also addresses the environmental consequences of oil palm plantation development. It explains that the widespread clearing of forests for plantations leads to deforestation, biodiversity loss, soil degradation, and water pollution. These environmental damages not only affect ecosystems but also undermine the agricultural and fishing practices that many rural dwellers rely on for survival. The use of chemicals and poor waste management on plantations further exacerbates environmental stress, posing health risks to nearby populations.

Another key point made by the authors is the disruption of traditional livelihood systems. In communities where people once depended on subsistence farming, hunting, and traditional oil palm processing, plantation expansion has forced a shift towards wage labor. This transition often leads to economic dependency, as locals lose their autonomy and become reliant on plantation work, which may not be sustainable or sufficient for household survival. In some cases, cultural practices and land-use traditions tied to the land are eroded.

In response to these findings, the authors recommend a more inclusive and sustainable approach to oil palm expansion. They call for stronger environmental regulations, land tenure reforms, and genuine community engagement in project planning and execution. Furthermore, companies should be held accountable for fulfilling their CSR obligations, and mechanisms must be established to ensure that communities benefit equitably from plantation activities.

The article "*The Chief, the Youth and the Plantation: Communal Politics in Southern Nigeria*"⁹ by Pauline von Hellermann, published in 2010, explores the complex interplay of traditional authority, youth activism, and corporate interests in the context of land disputes in Udo, a community located near the Okomu Oil Palm Plantation in Edo State, Nigeria. The study focuses on the 2006 incident in which the traditional ruler the Iyase of Udo was deposed by his community, particularly its

youth population, due to tensions over land rights and perceived collusion with the oil palm company. Von Hellermann uses this case to examine how local politics is shaped by broader socio-economic forces, including the expansion of agribusiness and the evolving role of traditional leadership.

The article details how youth in Udo, disillusioned by unemployment and exclusion from decision-making, mobilized against both the traditional chief and the perceived exploitation by the Okomu Oil Palm Company. The youth accused the chief of making land deals that favored the company at the expense of communal rights. Their activism was not merely reactive but part of a growing trend where younger generations assert themselves as protectors of community interests, particularly where elders are seen as complicit in the commodification of communal land. The youth led deposition of the chief marked a shift in local power dynamics, reflecting both generational tensions and resistance to corporate encroachment on indigenous land.

Von Hellermann concludes that this case illustrates the fragmentation and transformation of traditional authority in the face of modern economic pressures. The paper highlights how the intersection of local politics, youth activism, and commercial agriculture can challenge long standing structures of governance and legitimacy. It underscores the importance of understanding local contexts when evaluating the social impacts of large scale land acquisitions and plantation

economies. Ultimately, the study offers critical insights into how rural communities navigate change and resist marginalization in an era of expanding global agribusiness.

“Udo Community”, by The Okomu Oil Palm Company Plc published in 2021, highlights the company’s corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives and its relationship with the host community of Udo in Edo State, Nigeria.¹⁰ The publication outlines various developmental projects implemented by the company to support local infrastructure, education, healthcare, and economic empowerment. These include the construction and rehabilitation of schools, donation of medical supplies, provision of scholarships, and skills acquisition programs aimed at enhancing the livelihoods of residents. The document serves as a showcase of the company’s commitment to maintaining peaceful coexistence and contributing positively to the socio-economic well-being of the Udo people.

Additionally, the publication addresses the efforts made by Okomu Oil to foster dialogue and mutual understanding with traditional leaders, youth groups, and community associations within Udo. It emphasizes the importance of transparency, community engagement, and sustainable development in maintaining good relations with host communities.

Dr. A.O. Eweka in his article titled, *“Palm Oil Plantations and Environmental Change: Perspective from Okomu”*¹¹ published in 2020. investigates the environmental transformations associated with the expansion of palm oil plantations in and around the Okomu region of Edo State, Nigeria. Using the Okomu Oil Palm Company as a case study, the paper evaluates how large scale plantation agriculture contributes to deforestation, biodiversity loss, and changes in land use patterns. he further emphasizes that while palm oil production is economically significant, it has also led to the degradation of the Okomu Forest Reserve, one of Nigeria’s most important conservation areas.

Dr. Eweka explores the socio-ecological implications of these environmental changes, noting that indigenous communities around the plantation, such as Udo, have faced challenges related to land displacement, altered livelihoods, and reduced access to natural resources. The paper also touches on the conflicts between corporate interests and local environmental preservation, urging for stronger policy enforcement and sustainable agricultural practices. In conclusion, the work calls for a balance between economic development and environmental stewardship, recommending that government agencies, companies, and local communities collaborate to mitigate the adverse impacts of plantation expansion on both ecosystems and rural livelihoods.

“Contributions of Oil Palm Nucleus Estates to Economic Development: Situating the Presco Plc and Okomu Oil Palm Company’s Experiences in Nigeria”¹² by Baa Famous Adade. The research focuses on the role of oil palm nucleus estates large-scale industrial plantations with integrated processing facilities in promoting economic development in Nigeria, using Presco Plc and Okomu Oil Palm Company as case studies. Nucleus estates are often positioned as engines of agricultural growth due to their capacity for large-scale production, value addition, and employment generation. The author investigates how these two companies have contributed to the economic transformation of their host regions by examining areas such as employment, rural infrastructure, revenue generation, and agricultural modernization.

The study finds that both Presco Plc and Okomu Oil Palm Company have made significant contributions to local and national development. These include the creation of thousands of direct and indirect jobs, especially for youths and rural dwellers, which has helped reduce poverty and rural-urban migration.

Additionally, the companies have invested in social infrastructure such as roads, schools, and health centers, which have improved the quality of life in surrounding communities. Their operations have also enhanced value chain development through outgrower schemes and linkages with smallholder farmers. By establishing modern palm oil processing facilities, these companies have reduced

reliance on imported palm oil products and contributed to national self-sufficiency.

However, the paper does not overlook the challenges and controversies surrounding the operation of nucleus estates. It critically highlights concerns such as land acquisition disputes, environmental degradation, and limited inclusiveness in decision-making processes affecting host communities. The author argues that while these companies have been economically beneficial, a more community-centered and sustainable approach is needed to ensure equitable development. The paper concludes by advocating for stronger regulatory oversight, improved corporate social responsibility (CSR), and policies that protect the rights and livelihoods of local populations while supporting agribusiness growth.

The study "*Environmental Impacts of Oil Palm Processing in Nigeria*"¹³ by Sylvester Chibueze Izah, Tariwari C. N. Angaye, and Elijah Ohimain, published in 2016; investigates the environmental consequences associated with traditional and industrial oil palm processing in Nigeria. The authors emphasize that while oil palm production is a major economic activity that supports rural livelihoods, its processing methods especially in local mills often result in significant pollution and ecological degradation. The study identifies several pollutants, including wastewater, empty fruit bunches, fibers, and sludge, all of which are frequently discharged into the environment without treatment. These wastes contaminate nearby streams, soil, and

groundwater, affecting aquatic life and potentially harming human health through exposure and consumption.

Additionally, the paper discusses the impact of air emissions and greenhouse gases from the burning of biomass and palm oil residues, as well as the improper use of fossil fuels in local processing facilities. The authors argue that these environmental risks are intensified by the lack of awareness, technology, and regulatory enforcement in rural areas. They recommend the adoption of sustainable waste management practices, including composting, biogas generation, and wastewater treatment systems, to mitigate the negative impacts. The study ultimately calls for stronger government intervention, capacity building for local processors, and the integration of environmental protection strategies into Nigeria's broader agricultural policy framework to ensure that oil palm processing does not compromise environmental sustainability.

*"The Impact of Oil Palm Plantations on Local Communities"*¹⁴ by Kilpatrick et al. examines the multifaceted effects of expanding oil palm plantations on indigenous populations and their environments. Through comprehensive field research, including interviews and surveys, the authors assess how large-scale agricultural developments influence the socio-economic and cultural fabric of local communities. Their findings reveal that while such plantations can introduce

infrastructure improvements and employment opportunities, they often lead to significant challenges, such as displacement of indigenous peoples, loss of customary land rights, and environmental degradation.

A critical issue highlighted in the research is the frequent occurrence of land disputes arising from the expansion of oil palm estates. Many indigenous communities lack formal recognition of their ancestral lands, making them vulnerable to dispossession without adequate compensation or consultation. This does not only disrupts traditional livelihoods but also erodes cultural heritage and social cohesion. Additionally, the influx of migrant workers to meet labor demands can strain local resources and exacerbate tensions between native residents and newcomers.

Environmental concerns are also central to the study's findings. The conversion of forests to monoculture plantations contributes to deforestation, loss of biodiversity, and soil erosion, which in turn affect water quality and availability for local populations. These ecological changes have profound implications for communities that rely on natural resources for subsistence. The authors advocate for more sustainable and inclusive approaches to plantation development, emphasizing the need for policies that recognize and protect indigenous land rights, promote environmental stewardship, and ensure that the economic benefits of oil palm cultivation are equitably shared with affected communities.

Lucy Rist, Laurène Feintrenie, and Patrice Levang in their work "*The Livelihood Impacts of Oil Palm: Smallholders in Indonesia*"⁵ published in 2010, examines how oil palm expansion affects rural farmers. The authors conducted field research across various regions, analyzing the economic benefits and challenges faced by smallholders engaging in oil palm cultivation. They found that many smallholders experienced significant improvements in income and labor returns due to oil palm farming. However, the study also identified critical issues such as land tenure conflicts, lack of transparency, and unequal benefit-sharing between companies and local communities. These challenges were often exacerbated by the absence of clear land rights and inadequate consultation processes.

The authors concluded that while oil palm expansion has the potential to enhance rural livelihoods, realizing these benefits requires addressing governance and policy shortcomings. They recommended implementing more inclusive and transparent practices, ensuring free, prior, and informed consent from local communities, and establishing equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms. By improving environmental standards and focusing on the social impacts of land development, the expansion of oil palm cultivation could significantly benefit rural smallholders in rural communities.

The Article, *“Expansion of oil palm plantations in Nigeria: social and environmental impacts”* by A.C Ojemade, and I.O Uwubanmwun . Published in 2010; examine the rapid growth of oil palm plantations in Nigeria, emphasizing the significant social and environmental costs associated with this expansion. They observe that, despite the substantial economic returns driven by strong domestic and international demand, the adverse effects on indigenous communities and forest dwellers are profound.

The authors highlight the expansion often leads to the displacement of indigenous communities from their ancestral lands, resulting in the loss of livelihoods and cultural heritage. This displacement is frequently accompanied by inadequate compensation and limited opportunities for alternative employment, exacerbating poverty and social tensions within these communities.

Environmentally, the article points to significant degradation resulting from large-scale deforestation to make way for plantations. This deforestation contributes to biodiversity loss, soil erosion, and the disruption of water cycles, leading to long-term ecological imbalances. Additionally, the use of agrochemicals in plantation management can lead to soil and water pollution, further impacting local ecosystems and human health.

Ojemade and Uwubanmwun conclude by advocating for a more balanced approach to oil palm plantation expansion in Nigeria. They call for policies that not only promote economic growth but also safeguard the rights and well-being of local communities and protect the environment. Implementing sustainable practices and ensuring fair compensation and involvement of indigenous populations in decision-making processes are essential steps toward achieving this balance.

Inwalomhe Donald's article, *"Okomu Palm Oil Plc Corporate Social Responsibility in Edo State 1976–2017"*⁷ published in 2017: provides a comprehensive overview of the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives undertaken by Okomu Oil Palm Company Plc over a span of four decades. The piece highlights the company's contributions to the socio-economic development of Edo State, emphasizing its investments in healthcare, education, and infrastructure. Notably, Okomu Oil Plc has established multiple clinics and supported educational programs, reflecting its commitment to improving the well-being of its host communities. The article also discusses the company's engagement with local communities, aiming to foster sustainable development and mutual growth.

Methodology

This study adopt a historical approach , drawing upon historical records , company's repost and available scholarly literature. Through a comprehensive analysis of these source , the project will seek to present a nuanced understanding of the impacts of Okomu Oil Palm Company in Udo community.

In carrying out this research, various research techniques will be employed.

Primary Sources: will include Surveys and Oral interviews with Okomu Oil Palm Company's management and staff , relevant Udo community members, community leaders and knowledgeable personalities.

Secondary Sources: will include The Company's records and reports, government reports, Academic research and journals, Articles News paper and media reports.

Endnotes

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CHAPTER TWO

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Udo Community Before Okomu palm Oil Company

Before the establishment of Okomu Oil Palm Company in 1976, the Udo community was a predominantly rural and agrarian society characterized by subsistence farming, traditional governance, and a deeply rooted communal lifestyle. The people of Udo relied heavily on farming of staple crops such as yam, cassava, maize, and plantain, as well as hunting and fishing from nearby rivers and forests. The land and forest served not only as a source of livelihood but also as the backbone of their cultural and spiritual practices. Sacred groves, ancestral shrines, and communal farmlands underscored the community's connection to their environment, reinforcing a sense of shared identity and heritage¹.



Figure 2 : illustration of Traditional farming in Udo community before 1976, showcasing its agrarian and cultural heritage . (Source: <https://island.lk>)

The Udo community, located in present-day Ovia South-West Local Government Area of Edo State, Nigeria, traces its origins to the ancient Benin Kingdom, one of the most advanced pre-colonial civilizations in West Africa. Udo, historically, was a strategic and culturally significant settlement in the Benin Empire, known for its resistance, independence, and the role it played in the administrative and military affairs of the kingdom. Oral traditions and historical records suggest that Udo was once ruled by the *Iyase n'Udo*, a powerful chieftaincy title under the authority of the Oba of Benin. This title was not only symbolic but also practical, as Udo served as a frontier town for military defense and expansion during the height of the Benin Empire².

The history of Udo begins with the broader Edo speaking peoples, who are believed to have inhabited the region of modern day southern Nigeria for millennia. Archaeological evidence suggests that the area around Benin City and its environs, including Udo, was settled as early as the first millennium CE, with communities engaging in agriculture, trade, and craftsmanship. These early settlements were likely autonomous villages organized under lineage heads known as Uzama, who held both political and religious authority³.

According to Edo oral traditions, the world initially lacked land, and the creation of the earth was attributed to divine intervention. One tradition holds that Osanobua, the supreme deity, sent three sons from the sky in a canoe, one of whom, Igodo, created land by pouring sand from a snail shell onto the water. Igodo was subsequently made king, earning the title “Ogiso” (king from the sky). While this narrative is mythological, it reflects the Edo people's belief in their divine origins and the sacred nature of kingship. Historians, however, propose a more grounded explanation: the Edo likely migrated into the region from the northeast during the second half of the first millennium CE, intermarrying with local Efa people and gradually assimilating them into their culture⁴.

Udo is believed to have emerged as one of these early settlements, possibly as a key village or town under the “Uzama” system before the consolidation of the

Igodomigodo kingdom. Some scholars, such as Dmitri Bondarenko, argue that Udo may have been the first capital of the “Ogiso” dynasty, suggesting its prominence in the early political landscape⁵. This theory posits that Udo was a significant center before the capital was relocated to Benin City, highlighting its importance in the pre-Igodomigodo era.

The Igodomigodo kingdom, ruled by the “Ogiso” monarchy, marks a critical phase in the development of Udo. The kingdom's formation is attributed to Igodo, a prominent village leader who became the first “Ogiso” in the 10th century CE, likely through competition among autonomous Edo and Efe villages⁶. Udo's strategic location northwest of Benin City, near the Ovia River, made it a vital hub for trade, defense, and cultural exchange. The construction of town walls around Udo during this period, as noted in historical accounts, showcases the kingdom's architectural prowess and the town's role as a fortified settlement⁷.

During the “Ogiso” period, Udo was not only a political center but also a hub for craftsmanship. The era saw the establishment of specialized guilds, such as the “Onwina” (carpenters) and “Igbesanmwan” (carvers), which contributed to the kingdom's artistic heritage. Bronze casting, using the lost-wax technique, flourished, producing detailed sculptures and plaques that depicted rulers, deities, and significant events. These artistic achievements suggest that Udo, as a prominent town, likely

played a role in the cultural and economic life of Igodomigodo⁸.

Oral traditions also highlight Udo's significance in the “Ogiso” monarchy. For instance, the reign of “Ogiso” Ere, Igodo's son, is credited with cultural and technological advancements, such as the introduction of the royal throne (ekete) and other regalia. While some of these attributions may be conflated with later rulers like Oba Ewuare I, they underscore Udo's association with the early development of Edo kingship and governance⁹. Additionally, queens like Emose and Orhorho were significant figures in Igodomigodo's history, with Emose involved in governance and Orhorho's reign marked by conflict, indicating that Udo and other towns were part of a complex socio-political system¹⁰.

The transition from the “Ogiso” dynasty to the Oranjan/Eweka dynasty in the 12th century marks a pivotal moment in Udo's history. According to Edo traditions, the “Ogiso” dynasty faced internal strife, and the last “Ogiso”, Owodo, was overthrown or exiled. This paved the way for the establishment of the “Oba” dynasty, beginning with Eweka I, who was supported by Oranyan (Oranmiyan), a Yoruba prince from Ile-Ife. Some traditions suggest that Oranyan, a grandson of Oduduwa, introduced the Yoruba model of divine kingship to the Edo, consolidating power in Benin City¹¹.

Udo, however, remained a significant center and, at times, a rival to Benin City. During the early “Oba” period, particularly under Oba Ewedo (c. 13th century), Udo resisted the centralization of power in Benin City. The town was a stronghold for elements loyal to the “Ogiso” dynasty, and Ewedo faced opposition from Udo's leaders and the Ijo ferrymen of the Ovia River complex. A decisive battle resulted in Ewedo securing the royal stool of the “Ogiso” from the “Ogiame” (a leader associated with Udo), marking a shift in power to Benin City. Despite this, Udo retained its status as a semi-autonomous municipality within the Benin Kingdom, governed by the “Iyase” of Udo, a high-ranking chief¹².

Social and political organization in Udo before the advent of large scale industrial plantations was deeply anchored in traditional leadership systems, with the Iyase of Udo playing a central role in dispute resolution, land allocation, and cultural preservation. The community functioned on principles of kinship and collective responsibility, where land was commonly owned and decisions were made through consensus under the guidance of elders and community heads. This communal structure enabled the people of Udo to maintain control over their natural resources, manage local conflicts, and support a self sustaining economy that was relatively untouched by external capitalist forces¹³.

Economic activities before the establishment of Okomu was predominantly agrarian, with farming as the primary occupation. The fertile lands of the region supported the cultivation of crops such as yams, cassava, and maize, which sustained the community and facilitated trade with neighbors. Hunting and fishing supplemented agriculture, while craftsmanship, including weaving and pottery, contributed to local commerce¹⁴. Trade networks extended to Ubiaja and Ewohimi, with Udo participating in regional markets where goods and services were exchanged. The absence of significant industrial activity meant that economic life was closely tied to the land and traditional skills, with the Iyase and elders overseeing resource distribution to ensure communal welfare¹⁵.

Importantly, the Udo forest, later incorporated into the Okomu Forest Reserve, was not only a biodiversity rich ecosystem but also a cultural and economic asset for the indigenous people. It provided herbal medicines, construction materials, and wild food, while also hosting sacred sites that held ancestral significance. The community's relationship with their environment was symbiotic and conservation-oriented, long before formal environmental governance emerged. The arrival of Okomu Oil Palm Company brought significant shifts in land use, governance, and social relations, but prior to this, Udo remained a model of indigenous resilience, environmental stewardship, and socio-economic autonomy¹⁶.

The Establishment Of Okomu palm Oil Company

Palm oil was a cornerstone of Nigeria's economy during the colonial era, with the country being a leading global exporter in the 19th and early 20th centuries. However, post-independence in 1960, the focus shifted to petroleum, leading to a decline in agricultural exports. By the 1970s, Nigeria faced a vegetable oil deficit, importing significant quantities to meet domestic demand. The Federal Government, recognizing the need to revive agriculture and reduce import dependency, initiated projects to rehabilitate the palm oil sector, leveraging the country's fertile lands and historical expertise in palm cultivation.

Okomu Oil Palm Company Plc, located in Ovia South-West Local Government Area of Edo State, Nigeria, stands as one of the country's leading agribusinesses, specializing in palm oil and rubber production¹⁷. Established in 1976 as a federal government initiative to address Nigeria's vegetable oil deficit, and as part of a broader strategy to revitalize the nation's agricultural sector, particularly the oil palm industry, which had seen a steep decline since the late colonial and early post-independence years. The project was initiated under the auspices of a World Bank-assisted agricultural development program, designed to boost domestic palm oil production and reduce the country's reliance on imports¹⁸. The company was sited in the Okomu Forest Reserve, a biodiverse area located in Ovia South-West Local

Government Area of Edo State, which was initially designated for conservation purposes. This strategic location offered vast stretches of fertile land, tropical rainfall patterns, and suitable climatic conditions for oil palm cultivation¹⁹.

The company has grown into a publicly listed company with significant foreign investment, notably from Socfinaf S.A., a subsidiary of the Belgian Socfin Group. Today, Okomu is one of Nigeria's largest crude palm oil producer, contributing substantially to the national economy while navigating complex socio-economic and environmental challenges²⁰. This sub chapter explores the establishment of Okomu Oil Palm Company, tracing its origins, development, and expansion.

In 1976, the Federal Government established Okomu Oil Palm Company as a pilot project within the Okomu Forest Reserve, a biodiverse area in Edo State historically significant for local Ijaw and Edo communities²¹. The project aimed to boost palm oil production and promote food security. Allocated 15,580 hectares, with 12,500 hectares designated for oil palm planting and the remainder as a conservation buffer²², Okomu was envisioned as a model for large-scale agribusiness.

The rationale behind the establishment of Okomu Oil Palm Company was multifaceted. Firstly, it sought to enhance Nigeria's agro-industrial capacity by mechanizing and commercializing oil palm production. At the time, the country's

palm oil sector was still largely dependent on smallholder farming with limited infrastructure. The creation of Okomu marked an effort to move from subsistence production to large-scale, industrialized agriculture. Secondly, the company aimed to generate rural employment, promote technology transfer in agriculture, and boost foreign exchange earnings by improving the export potential of palm oil and its derivatives²³. These goals aligned with the broader national objective of diversifying the economy away from oil and promoting sustainable rural development.

Okomu Oil Palm Company was formally incorporated as a private limited liability company on December 3, 1979, marking its transition from a government project to a structured entity²⁴. The initial focus was on developing oil palm plantations to produce Fresh Fruit Bunches (FFB) for sale to local processors. By 1985, the company installed a 1.5-tonne-per-hour FFB mill, enabling it to process crude palm oil (CPO) and palm kernel, thus adding value to its output²⁵.

Following its establishment, Okomu quickly began clearing land and planting improved hybrid oil palm seedlings, while also establishing rubber plantations as part of a diversification effort. By 1989, Okomu had planted 5,500 hectares with oil palms and established critical infrastructure, including staff quarters, a primary school, a clinic, office blocks, workshops, a petrol station, processing mills, plantation roads, administrative buildings and a powerhouse²⁶. The early years were marked by the

development of a self-contained estate system, wherein housing, water, electricity, and other basic amenities and facilities were provided for staff and laborers, many of whom were drawn from surrounding communities. These initial investments laid the groundwork for the company's eventual transformation into a fully integrated agro-industrial enterprise²⁷.

However, the project faced challenges, including limited funding and logistical constraints, typical of government-led initiatives in Nigeria during this period. The allocation of land within the Okomu Forest Reserve also sparked early tensions with local communities, who relied on the forest for farming, fishing, and cultural practices²⁸.

In the late 1980s, Nigeria embarked on a wide-reaching Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) that emphasized the privatization of state-owned enterprises. In 1990, Okomu Oil Palm Company was partially privatized, by the Technical Committee on Privatization and Commercialization (TCPC), converting it into a Public Limited Company (PLC) listed on the Nigerian Stock Exchange²⁹; with significant investment and managerial control eventually acquired by the Socfin Group, a multinational agro-industrial conglomerate with operations across Africa and Southeast Asia³⁰. This shift ushered in a new phase of corporate management, marked by the expansion of plantation areas, modernization of processing equipment, and improved operational

efficiency. The transition also positioned the company as one of Nigeria's largest producers of crude palm oil (CPO) and rubber, with thousands of hectares under cultivation³¹.

Following the privatization, Okomu grew rapidly, reaching about 33,113 hectares by 2015 (comprising the main Estate, extension 1 and extension 2), with 17,148 hectares planted with oil palms and 1,811 hectares with rubber trees, and the rest where kept as reserve³².

Key milestones include, 1998; Introduction of rubber cultivation to diversify revenue streams and construction of a rubber factory, 2001: Acquisition of 6,116 hectares known as Extension 1, 2006; Initiation of a replanting program to replace older palm blocks, improving yields and environmental sustainability, 2007; Planting of 1,969 hectares of oil palm and 1, 811 hectares of rubber trees on extension 1, 2008; Commissioning of a 2.5 tons per hectares factory to compliment the company's rubber plantations, 2013; Expansion of the 30 tons per hectare mill to a 60 tons per hectare palm oil mill, allowing the company to produce more than 40,000 tons of crude palm oil (CPO) per annum, 2014; Acquisition of 11,416 hectares of land and 10 tons per hectare palm oil mill from Hartman Ltd, in Ovia North-East Local Government Area and Uhumwonde Local Government Area, including 664 hectares of cultivated oil palms. This acquisition was known as Extension 2³³.

In conclusion, Okomu's presence from its inception has significantly impacted the surrounding Udo community and other indigenous groups living near the forest reserve. The company's presence has brought about numerous economic, social and academic benefits to the residents of Udo community and other indigenous groups. On the other hand, The initial land acquisition, while formally sanctioned by the federal government, was perceived by many locals as displacement without adequate consultation or compensation³⁴. Traditional communal land ownership systems were disrupted, and forest areas that served both economic and cultural purposes for local populations were converted into plantation blocks. Tensions emerged over issues such as access to land, environmental degradation, and employment equity. These dynamics have continued to define the complex relationship between the company and its host communities, prompting ongoing debates about corporate social responsibility, land rights, and sustainable development³⁵. All of these we discuss in details in the subsequent chapter.

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CHAPTER THREE

GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF OKOMU PALM OIL COMPANY.

The palm oil industry in Nigeria, once a global powerhouse contributing 30% of the world's supply in the 1960s, experienced a sharp decline by the 1970s due to the oil boom's shift in focus to petroleum, reducing Nigeria's market share to less than 2% and necessitating imports of approximately 1 million tons annually¹. To address this crisis, the Federal Government initiated large-scale agricultural projects, with Okomu Oil Palm Company, established in Edo State's Okomu Forest Reserve, as a cornerstone effort to revive the sector². This chapter examines the growth and development of Okomu Oil Palm Company from 1976 to 2015, with a specific emphasis on its production operations, including oil palm cultivation, milling, and rubber processing. Okomu's evolution from a government-led pilot project to a privatized industry leader highlights its role in reducing Nigeria's palm oil import dependency and fostering agro-industrial development. Despite challenges such as land disputes, environmental concerns, and economic volatility, Okomu's advancements in production efficiency, technological innovation, and sustainability positioned it as a model for agribusiness success. The narrative is structured chronologically, covering the company's establishment (1976–1989), privatization and restructuring (1990–2000), operational scaling (2001–2010), and maturity with sustainability initiatives (2011–2015), concluding with implications for Nigeria's

agricultural sector.

Okomu Oil Palm Company was founded in 1976 as a federal government pilot project to rejuvenate Nigeria's palm oil industry and curb reliance on imports³. The government allocated 15,580 hectares in the Okomu Forest Reserve, designating 12,500 hectares for oil palm cultivation and the remainder for conservation to balance agricultural expansion with ecological preservation⁴. Incorporated as a limited liability company in 1979, Okomu commenced production operations with a 1.5-tonne-per-hour (T/h) palm oil mill designed to process fresh fruit bunches (FFB) into crude palm oil (CPO)⁵. The cultivation process began with land clearing, nursery establishment, and planting of high-yield oil palm varieties, such as Tenera hybrids, developed by the Nigerian Institute for Oil Palm Research (NIFOR) to maximize oil output⁶. By the early 1980s, approximately 10,000 hectares were planted, with palms reaching maturity within 3–5 years, enabling initial harvests⁷. To diversify revenue, Okomu established rubber plantations on 4,000 hectares, processing latex into crumb rubber for export using a small-scale coagulation and drying facility⁸.

The production process during this period involved several stages: nursery propagation, where seedlings were raised for 12–18 months; field planting, with palms spaced 9 meters apart in a triangular pattern to optimize sunlight exposure; and harvesting, where FFB were manually cut and transported to the mill. The milling

process included sterilization to deactivate enzymes, threshing to separate fruits from bunches, digestion to release oil, and pressing to extract CPO, which was then clarified and stored. However, early operations faced significant challenges, including bureaucratic inefficiencies, limited funding, and the global oil price crash of the mid-1980s, which strained Nigeria's agricultural budget⁹. These constraints resulted in low FFB yields (5–7 tonnes per hectare) and underutilized milling capacity, producing an estimated 5,000–10,000 tons of CPO annually¹⁰. Poor rural infrastructure, such as unreliable roads and power supply, further hampered logistics, reflecting systemic issues in Nigeria's pre-Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) agricultural sector¹¹. Despite these hurdles, Okomu's early production operations laid the foundation for future growth, demonstrating the potential of large-scale plantations.

The introduction of Nigeria's Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) in 1986 shifted agricultural policy toward market-driven reforms, prompting Okomu's privatization in 1990¹². The company transitioned into a public limited company (PLC) with an initial public offering (IPO) on the Nigerian Stock Exchange (NSE), now the Nigerian Exchange Group (NGX), distributing shares among individual investors, local communities, and government entities¹³. This restructuring improved corporate governance and access to capital, enabling significant upgrades to production operations. In the early 1990s, Socfinaf S.A., a Luxembourg-based agribusiness with

expertise since 1912, acquired a majority stake (~60–63% by the 2000s), introducing advanced production technologies and management practices¹⁴.

Okomu's production operations were transformed during this period. The company expanded its oil palm plantation to approximately 15,000 hectares, increasing FFB production through improved agronomic practices, such as optimized fertilizer application and pest control¹⁵. The milling process was upgraded with the installation of a 5 T/h mill, incorporating automated sterilization and pressing systems to enhance oil extraction rates from 18% to 20%¹⁶. Kernel processing facilities were also introduced to produce palm kernel oil (PKO) and cake, adding value to by-products¹⁷. Rubber production was scaled up with the acquisition of additional land concessions, and a modernized processing plant improved crumb rubber quality for export markets¹⁸. By 2000, CPO output reached an estimated 15,000–20,000 tons annually, with revenues growing from less than N100 million in the 1980s to approximately N500 million, according to NGX filings¹⁹. FFB yields improved to 8–10 tonnes per hectare, driven by Socfinaf's expertise and better planting materials.

Despite these advancements, rapid expansion brought challenges. In 1998, Okomu faced protests from local communities over land disputes, as villages within its concession were evicted without adequate compensation. Environmental concerns, particularly deforestation from land clearing, also emerged, prompting criticism from

local and international stakeholders²⁰. These issues highlighted the need for improved community engagement and environmental management, influencing Okomu's production policies in subsequent years²¹. The company began integrating social considerations into its operations, such as providing compensation and employment opportunities to affected communities, to ensure sustainable production growth²².

The 2000s marked a period of significant scaling in Okomu's production operations, driven by substantial investments in infrastructure and technology. The company modernized its palm oil mill, increasing capacity to 30 T/h by installing high-efficiency presses and clarifiers, which raised oil extraction rates to 22%. A new rubber processing factory was established, equipped with advanced coagulation, drying, and baling systems to meet international standards for crumb rubber exports. Infrastructure upgrades included irrigation systems, improved nurseries, and mechanized harvesting tools to enhance productivity. In 2006, Okomu launched a replanting program to replace aging palms with high-yield Tenera hybrids, boosting FFB yields by an estimated 20% per hectare to 12–14 tonnes²³. The company also expanded its plantation to approximately 18,000 hectares and acquired additional farmlands for future growth, including plans for Extension 2. By 2010, CPO production exceeded 40,000 tons annually, with rubber output contributing significantly to export revenues.

Okomu's production operations were optimized through systematic improvements. Cultivation practices incorporated precision agriculture techniques, such as soil testing and tailored fertilization, to maximize yields. The milling process was streamlined with automated systems for threshing, digestion, and clarification, reducing processing times and energy costs. Quality control measures ensured that CPO and PKO met domestic and international standards, enabling Okomu to penetrate export markets in West Africa and beyond²⁴. Rubber production involved tapping mature trees (aged 5–7 years), coagulating latex with formic acid, and processing it into crumb rubber through milling and drying, with an annual output of approximately 5,000 tons by 2010. These advancements supported Okomu's financial growth, with revenues rising from N1 billion in the early 2000s to N5–10 billion by 2010, driven by higher output and global palm oil demand.

However, challenges persisted. The 2008–2009 global recession caused fluctuations in commodity prices, impacting export revenues. Ongoing land disputes with local communities required careful negotiation and compensation programs to maintain operational stability. Okomu addressed these issues by investing in community infrastructure, such as schools, clinics, and roads, which improved worker welfare and local support for its operations. These efforts ensured that production growth was sustainable and aligned with socio-economic development goals in Edo

State.

By 2015, Okomu managed over 20,000 hectares, with CPO production nearing 50,000 tons annually, cementing its status as Nigeria's leading palm oil producer. The company continued to refine its production operations, leveraging technology and sustainability practices to maintain competitiveness. The palm oil mill was upgraded to a 45 T/h capacity, incorporating energy-efficient boilers and wastewater treatment systems to reduce environmental impact²⁵. Cultivation practices were enhanced with integrated pest management and organic fertilizers, reducing chemical use while maintaining yields of 14–16 tonnes per hectare²⁶. Rubber production was further optimized with automated tapping systems and improved processing techniques, increasing output to approximately 7,000 tons annually. Planning for Extension 2, an additional plantation area, signaled Okomu's commitment to long-term production growth.

Sustainability became a key focus during this period. Okomu joined the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) as a member before 2015, achieving full certification in 2017²⁷. RSPO compliance required adherence to strict environmental and social standards, including no deforestation, fair labor practices, and community engagement²⁸. Okomu implemented forest regeneration partnerships to restore degraded areas within its concession, addressing earlier deforestation concerns. The

company also adopted cleaner production technologies, such as methane capture from palm oil mill effluent (POME), to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. These initiatives aligned with global demands for sustainable palm oil, enhancing Okomu's access to premium markets in Europe and Asia. Financially, revenues exceeded N20 billion by 2015, reflecting robust performance on the NGX and strong global demand for CPO and rubber.

Okomu's production operations significantly contributed to Edo State's economy through job creation (over 5,000 direct and indirect jobs) and infrastructure development. The company's NGX performance attracted investor confidence, reinforcing its role as a model for agribusiness success. By 2015, Okomu played a pivotal role in Nigeria's push for palm oil self-sufficiency, reducing import reliance and demonstrating the efficacy of privatized agricultural enterprises²⁹. However, challenges such as global commodity price volatility and the need for continuous community engagement required ongoing strategic adjustments to sustain production growth.

In conclusion, from 1976 to 2015, Okomu Oil Palm Company transformed from a 12,500-hectare government project producing ~5,000 tons of CPO annually to a 20,000+-hectare PLC generating ~50,000 tons, with revenues growing from less than N100 million to over N20 billion. Its production operations evolved through

strategic phases: modest beginnings with manual cultivation and milling, technological upgrades post-privatization, large-scale optimization in the 2000s, and sustainability-driven advancements by 2015. Privatization in 1990, Socfinaf's expertise, and investments in modern milling, replanting, and rubber processing were key drivers of this growth. Despite challenges like land disputes and environmental concerns, Okomu's production advancements offer lessons for agribusiness development, contrasting with the stagnation of state-run enterprises. Data limitations for the pre-1990 period suggest a need for further archival research, while post-2015 sustainability efforts, such as RSPO certification, warrant additional study. Okomu's trajectory underscores the potential for agricultural revival in Nigeria, aligning with national goals of palm oil self-sufficiency and economic diversification through efficient, sustainable production operations.

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CHAPTER FOUR

IMPACTS OF OKOMU OIL PALM COMPANY IN THE UDO COMMUNITY.

Positive impacts of Okomu palm oil company in Udo community.

Okomu Oil Palm Company Plc, established in 1976 as a federal government initiative and privatized in 1990, is one of Nigeria's leading agribusinesses, specializing in palm oil and rubber production in Edo State¹. Located in Ovia South-West Local Government Area, the Udo community is a rural settlement near Okomu's main estate, historically dependent on subsistence agriculture. Over the decades, Okomu has transformed Udo through its operations and robust corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs, fostering economic growth, infrastructure development, social empowerment, and environmental sustainability. Despite challenges such as land disputes and security concerns, Okomu's initiatives have significantly improved the quality of life in Udo. This sub chapter seeks to examine these positive impacts, highlighting specific contributions and their implications for sustainable community development in Udo community.

Okomu Oil Palm Company, headquartered at Okomu-Udo, operates three concessions registered with the Edo State Geographic Information Service, covering over 15,580 hectares, with 12,500 hectares dedicated to oil palm cultivation. The company, majority-owned by Socfinaf S.A. (62.94%), is a key player in Nigeria's

agricultural sector, contributing significantly to the national economy through crude palm oil (CPO) and rubber production. The Udo community, primarily comprising indigenous farmers, faced economic limitations before Okomu's interventions, with limited access to modern infrastructure and employment opportunities. Okomu's CSR framework, aligned with the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) principles, emphasizes community welfare, environmental stewardship, and economic development². Since the early establishment of the company to 2015, Okomu has implemented targeted programs in Udo, including infrastructure upgrades and skill acquisition initiatives, to foster sustainable progress.

Okomu Oil Palm Company has been a cornerstone of economic development in the Udo community by providing significant employment opportunities. Since its inception in 1976, the company has grown to become one of the largest employers in the region. By 2015, Okomu employed approximately 800 permanent workers and numerous subcontractors, with estimates suggesting a workforce of up to 2,000 permanent and 2,000 semi-permanent employees in later years, many of whom were drawn from local communities, including Udo³. In 2013, Okomu reported a workforce that included over 100 Udo residents in roles such as plantation workers, mill operators, and administrative staff, providing stable incomes that have improved household living standards⁴.

The company offered jobs in various capacities, including plantation workers, factory operatives, and administrative staff. These opportunities provided stable income for many Udo residents, reducing poverty and improving household livelihoods. For instance, roles in palm fruit harvesting, processing, and logistics were accessible to locals with minimal formal education, thereby integrating a broad segment of the community into the formal economy⁵. Also, salaries earned from Okomu have enabled families to afford secondary education and healthcare, reducing poverty levels in Udo.

The company's economic impact extends beyond direct employment, Okomu's operations stimulated local commerce by creating demand for goods and services. Local businesses, such as food vendors and transport providers, benefited from the influx of workers and the company's activities. The company's out-grower scheme, where local farmers were supported to cultivate oil palm, further empowered residents economically by providing training, seedlings, and a ready market for their produce⁶. Through the job training and capacity-building programs, Okomu equipped local employees with skills in modern agricultural practices, machinery operation, and management, enhancing their employability and contributing to human capital development in Udo⁷.

In April 2014, Okomu launched a smallholder farmer integration program,

aiming to incorporate 5,000 smallholder farmers, including those from Udo, into its supply chain by providing training in good agricultural practices (GAP) and access to high-yield seedlings. This initiative has boosted local farmers' incomes by an estimated 20%, as they supply fresh fruit bunches (FFB) to Okomu's mills⁸.

Additionally, Okomu's financial success, with a record net profit of about ₦29.9 billion in 2015 (a 94% increase from ₦20.6 billion in 2013), has enabled reinvestment in community programs⁹. The company's export of rubber products also created indirect economic benefits, as revenue supports local development projects. By fostering skill development through workshops on financial literacy and modern farming techniques, Okomu has empowered Udo residents to pursue entrepreneurial ventures, further enhancing economic resilience.

Also, as a major employer, Okomu has created thousands of jobs, reducing rural-urban migration. Its operations support small and medium enterprises through local sourcing and contracts. The company's listing on the Nigerian Stock Exchange and consistent dividend payments (e.g., N12 per share in 2013) demonstrate financial stability, attracting investors and contributing to Nigeria's capital market¹⁰.

Okomu Oil Palm Company significantly contributed to the infrastructural transformation of the Udo community by investing in essential facilities that improved the quality of life for residents. The company constructed and maintained

access roads connecting Udo and surrounding villages to its plantation and processing facilities. These roads facilitated transportation of goods and people, reducing isolation and improving access to markets and services. For example, the Okomu-Udo road, a critical artery for the community, was regularly maintained by the company, enhancing connectivity¹¹. Since 1998, the company has renovated roads within and around its plantations, including a key access road to Udo, reducing travel time to Benin City from three hours to approximately one hour¹². In 2011, Okomu graded additional roads in Udo, improving access to markets and facilitating trade¹³. These improvements have been critical for local farmers transporting produce, boosting economic activity.



Figure 3 : Okomu-Udo road constructed by Okomu Oil Palm Company, enhancing connectivity and market access for Udo residents (Source: Okomu Oil Palm Company Plc, 2013).

Okomu has provided electricity to parts of the Udo community through its power generation systems, which were initially set up to support plantation operations but extended to nearby areas. Additionally, the company constructed boreholes and water treatment facilities, ensuring access to clean water, which was a significant improvement in a region where water scarcity was a challenge¹⁴. The company also built staff quarters and supported the development of community infrastructure, such as community halls, which served as venues for social gatherings and local

governance activities. These facilities fostered community cohesion and provided spaces for civic engagement¹⁵.

Okomu Oil Palm Company implemented various social welfare initiatives that directly benefited the Udo community, aligning with its corporate social responsibility (CSR) objectives.

The company established and supported schools in the Udo community, providing scholarships and educational materials to students. For instance, Okomu funded the construction of classrooms and provided teaching aids, which improved access to quality education for children in Udo and neighboring areas¹⁶. By 2015, these efforts had increased school enrollment and literacy rates in the community¹⁷. In November 2012, the company renovated a primary school in Udo, equipping it with modern classrooms and learning materials for over 200 students¹⁸. Additionally, Okomu's scholarship program provided funding for 50 Udo students to attend secondary and tertiary institutions in 2015¹⁹.

Okomu also constructed and operated health centers in the Udo community, offering free maternal and child health services to over 1,000 residents annually²⁰, and free or subsidized medical services to residents. These facilities addressed common health issues, such as malaria and maternal health challenges, significantly improving

community health outcomes. The company also organized health outreach programs, including vaccination campaigns and health education, which reduced morbidity rates²¹.

In the aspect of Social and Cultural Impacts, Okomu has prioritized social cohesion and cultural preservation in Udo through inclusive engagement. The company collaborates with community leaders to ensure its initiatives align with local priorities, fostering trust. For instance, in June 2013, Okomu held a stakeholder meeting with Udo's Iyase and elders to discuss development projects, resulting in the allocation of funds for a community hall completed in December 2013²². This hall serves as a venue for social gatherings and cultural events, strengthening community bonds.

Okomu maintained a community liaison office to address grievances and foster dialogue with Udo residents. Regular town hall meetings ensured that community concerns were heard, and projects were tailored to local needs. This participatory approach strengthened trust between the company and the community²³.

Although, oil palm plantations have faced criticism for environmental impacts, Okomu Oil Palm Company implemented sustainable practices that benefited the Udo community and its environment during the period under review. Okomu established a conservation area within its concession, protecting local biodiversity and preserving

native flora and fauna. The Okomu National Park, adjacent to the company's operations, benefited from Okomu's support in conservation efforts, which indirectly promoted eco-tourism and environmental awareness in Udo²⁴.



Figure 4: Okomu's reforestation program in Udo, to restore biodiversity. (Source: Okomu Oil Palm Company Plc, 2012).

Furthermore, the company introduced modern farming techniques, such as integrated pest management and efficient water use, which reduced environmental degradation. These practices were shared with local farmers through extension services, improving agricultural productivity and sustainability in the Udo community²⁵. Also, due to its promotion of oil palm cultivation, Okomu helped diversify the local economy, reducing reliance on subsistence farming. The company's

support for out-growers enabled Udo farmers to adopt cash crop farming, which provided a stable income and reduced economic vulnerability²⁶.

Okomu's operations created a ripple effect in the Udo community, stimulating economic activity beyond direct employment and infrastructure. The company's procurement of local materials, such as construction supplies and agricultural inputs, supported small-scale enterprises. Additionally, the payment of taxes and royalties to the Edo State government contributed to regional development, some of which was reinvested in Udo through public projects²⁷.

Women and youth empowerment were not left out. In April 2014, Okomu partnered with Foremost Development Services to train 60 Udo women in soap-making and tailoring, enabling them to start small businesses²⁸. Similarly, a youth training program launched in January 2014 equipped 40 young Udo residents with skills in agribusiness, with 10 participants securing contracts to supply FFB to Okomu²⁹. Okomu also supports cultural preservation by sponsoring the annual Udo harvest festival, which celebrates local traditions and attracts visitors, boosting community pride and tourism. In 2013, the company allocated ₦5 million to the festival, enhancing its scale and impact³⁰.

Okomu's adherence to RSPO guidelines ensures environmentally responsible

practices that benefit Udo. Since 2006, the company has implemented sustainable farming methods, such as integrated pest management and reduced chemical use, minimizing environmental degradation³¹. In 2012, Okomu launched a reforestation program, planting 1,500 trees around Udo to restore biodiversity and combat soil erosion³². In March 2014, the company conducted environmental education workshops for 200 Udo residents, promoting waste management and conservation practice³³.

Okomu's smallholder program also supports sustainable agriculture. By providing Udo farmers with high-yield, disease-resistant seedlings and training in eco-friendly practices, the company has reduced deforestation pressures while increasing productivity³⁴. For example, Okomu's initiative helped over 50 Udo farmers adopt sustainable cultivation methods, preserving local ecosystems³⁵. These efforts ensure that Udo's natural resources remain viable for future generations.

The impact of Okomu's initiatives is evident in individual success stories. Grace Osagie, a 35-year-old Udo resident, joined Okomu's women's empowerment program in April 2024. Through training in soap-making, she established a small business, earning ₦50,000 monthly to support her children's education³⁶. Similarly, Mr Michael Egharevba, a plantation worker since 2008, used his savings to build a home in Udo, improving his family's living conditions³⁷.

Also, the story of Mrs Ekhaton, a Udo resident, Previously a subsistence farmer, joined Okomu's women's empowerment program, learning tailoring skills. She now runs a small business, supporting her family's education and healthcare needs³⁸. These stories highlight how Okomu's programs have transformed lives, fostering economic independence and social mobility.

Negative impacts of Okomu Oil Palm Company in the Udo Community.

As previously stated, the Okomu Oil Palm Company Plc, was established in 1976 as a federal government initiative to address Nigeria's vegetable oil deficit, it has now grown into a significant player in the nation's agricultural sector. Located in Okomu-Udo, Ovia South West Local Government Area of Edo State, the company operates a 15,580-hectare plantation, with 12,500 hectares dedicated to oil palm cultivation and later diversification into rubber production. While the company has been lauded for its economic contributions, such as job creation and infrastructure development its operations have profoundly affected the Udo community, a historically agrarian society with deep cultural roots. Allegations of environmental degradation, land dispossession, human rights violations, food insecurity, restricted resource access, and social conflicts, have sparked tensions between the company and local residents, raising questions about the cost of industrial agriculture³⁹. This sub chapter aims to examines the negative impacts of Okomu Oil Palm Company on the

Udo community from 1796 to 2015, tracing the community's historical context and analyzing the environmental, socioeconomic, and human rights consequences of the company's activities.

In 1976, the Nigerian federal government established Okomu Oil Palm Company as a pilot project to boost vegetable oil production, allocating 15,580 hectares of land, much of which overlapped with Udo's communal territories. In 1990, the company was privatized, with Socfin, a Belgian multinational, acquiring a 62.69% stake, leading to aggressive expansion of oil palm plantations. By 2012, 9,713 hectares were under cultivation, with plans for further growth. The company's arrival promised economic development, including jobs and infrastructure, but early interactions with Udo residents revealed tensions over land acquisition processes, which lacked transparent consultation.

The Udo community initially viewed the company's arrival with cautious optimism, expecting benefits like employment and schools. However, the lack of free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) during land acquisition, coupled with the government's authority under the Land Use Act of 1976, facilitated land allocation without adequate compensation or resettlement, leading to early disputes⁴⁰. By the late 1970s, villagers reported restricted access to farmland. This set the stage for decades of conflict, as community rights were sidelined in favor of industrial

development.

One of the most significant impacts of Okomu Oil Palm Company's operations on the Udo community was the dispossession of ancestral lands and forced evictions. In 1998, the company was implicated in the destruction of three villages "Oweike, Agbede, and Ijawcamp" without prior notice or compensation⁴¹. Local resident "Sunny Odiase" reported that bulldozers demolished homes, farmlands, and properties, causing distress that contributed to the deaths of village chiefs due to frustration⁴². A state government committee established to investigate these evictions failed to visit the affected villages and labeled residents as "illegal occupants," despite evidence of their long-standing presence⁴³.

In 2010, the company attempted to evict the Marakilolo community, but resistance from local men, women, and youths halted the action. However, the company's expansion continued to encroach on community lands, swallowing up farms and leaving residents without viable alternatives for livelihoods. In 2015, the Edo State government declared Okomu's acquisition of over 13,000 hectares illegal and ordered its revocation, but the company ignored this directive, further escalating tensions. The absence of FPIC and environmental impact assessments (EIAs) violated international standards, resulting in the loss of customary lands central to the Udo community's identity and sustenance⁴⁴. These actions displaced families, disrupted

traditional land tenure systems, and left many residents homeless or forced to squat in neighboring communities.

The operations of Okomu Oil Palm Company have also significantly altered the Udo community's ecological landscape, with deforestation and pollution undermining local ecosystems. The company's monoculture plantations have caused extensive environmental degradation in the Okomu Forest Reserve, once a biodiverse rainforest hosting species like forest elephants and chimpanzees⁴⁵. Deforestation for oil palm and rubber cultivation has led to soil erosion, habitat loss, and reduced biodiversity.

According to Community activist "Idemudia Adesuwa", the Udo community reliant on the forest for food, medicinal herbs, and cultural practices, faced severe restrictions on resource access. She highlighted that the scarcity of forest resources like snails and vegetables, critical for women's roles in food security, Medicinal herbs used for maternal healthcare became inaccessible, impacting community health⁴⁶. Water pollution from palm oil processing has further degraded local rivers, critical for fishing and domestic use. Effluents from the company's mills contaminated streams, reducing fish stocks and affecting livelihoods, Soil degradation from monoculture practices has also diminished agricultural productivity on remaining community lands⁴⁷.

Deforestation also increased human-wildlife conflicts, as displaced animals encroached on settlements, further straining resources. A 2019 incident highlighted this impact when Okomu was accused of killing an elephant that strayed into its plantation, sparking outrage among conservationists⁴⁸.

Despite claims of compliance with Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) and ISO 14001 standards. The RSPO audit was criticized for inadequate due diligence on land disputes and human rights abuses, Chemicals used by the company and deforestation contradict environmental management claims, as evidenced by community testimonies. hence,

with deforestation continuing to be properly checked, the environmental impacts have disrupted the Udo community's traditional reliance on forests and rivers, threatening long-term ecological sustainability.

Okomu's operations have been linked to serious human rights violations, intensifying conflicts with the Udo community. For example, The company restricted community access to roads by digging trenches to prevent theft, compelling residents to take longer routes through Ondo State to reach markets. A notable 2010–2011 incident saw villagers “locked in” by security measures, limiting mobility and access to economic opportunities. These restrictions disrupted trade and social networks, isolating Udo from neighboring communities From December 17, 2010, to February

25, 2011. military personnel enforced this “lock-in,” threatening to shoot trespassers⁴⁹.

In 2015, violent clashes resulted in the deaths of five Okomu Oil Palm Company workers, reportedly in retaliation for unresolved land disputes. Earlier that year, suspected Ijaw youths also killed two workers and set 300 hectares of plantations ablaze, citing the company’s failure to address grievances⁵⁰. In response to this, the company security personnel, allegedly collaborated with the Nigerian army to burn down Ijaw-Gbene village, displacing over 80 residents⁵¹. Earlier, in 1998, three villages were demolished, displacing families without redress. Community members reported harassment by company security, including accusations of theft and intimidation by some contractors. The presence of military personnel on the plantation, intended to protect company assets, was perceived as oppressive, stifling dissent. Women faced disproportionate impacts, losing access to forests for gathering resources like snails, and experiencing restricted mobility due to various checkpoints. These acts of violence, coupled with the use of security forces to intimidate residents, highlight a pattern of repression that eroded community trust and exacerbated human rights concerns.

The expansion of Okomu Oil Palm Company’s plantations has significantly undermined food security in the Udo community. The loss of farmlands forced residents to abandon subsistence agriculture, with women particularly affected due to

their role in farming and gathering forest products⁵². Idemudia Adesuwa noted that the inability to access forests for snails, vegetables, and herbs disrupted traditional food systems, and the destruction of communal resources disrupted cultural practices tied to food production, such as the use of oil palm in local diets and rituals. The shift to industrial monoculture prioritized export oriented production over local food sovereignty, leaving the Udo community economically marginalized, eventually leading to hunger for those who could not afford exported products⁵³.

The company's promise of job creation has been criticized as insufficient to offset these losses. Okomu reported employing approximately 351 permanent workers and several subcontractors , but over 80% of plantation workers were sourced from neighboring states, limiting local employment opportunities. Hence, the lack of alternative livelihoods pushed many youths into unemployment, contributing to social unrest and “attendant vices” such as petty crime and desperation⁵⁴.

Further more, the Okomu Oil Palm Company's control over access roads has severely restricted the Udo community's mobility and access to markets, schools, and healthcare. The company's decision to dig trenches across public roads to prevent theft of palm fruits effectively isolated communities like Gbelebu, increasing travel times to Benin City from one and a half hours to over three hours⁵⁵. These barriers disrupted economic activities, as residents struggled to transport goods to markets or

access essential services.

In 2015, the company imposed a nighttime curfew and controlled entry points, labeling community activists as “troublemakers” and limiting their movements⁵⁶. Mr Robinson described the experience as akin to “passing a border”, highlighting the loss of freedom and autonomy²⁰. The use of military personnel to enforce these restrictions further militarized the area, creating an atmosphere of fear and oppression.

Additionally, the Udo community’s social and cultural fabric has been profoundly disrupted by the company’s operations. The destruction of villages and sacred sites, such as those in Oweike, Agbede, and Ijawcamp, erased historical landmarks and communal spaces integral to the community’s identity⁵⁷. The imposition of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in 2010, which community members rejected as exploitative, was perceived as an attempt to formalize their subjugation, with terms that would have “sent them straight into slavery”⁵⁸. According to a local chief, the loss of access to forests and farmlands also disrupted traditional gender roles, particularly for women, who were responsible for gathering medicinal herbs and forest products⁵⁹. The inability to perform these roles undermined women’s social standing and economic contributions, exacerbating gender inequalities.

Although, the community has actively resisted Okomu Oil Palm Company’s

actions, voicing their grievances through protests, legal challenges, and advocacy. During the protest, residents described the destruction of livelihoods, stating, “Our farmlands are gone, and we can no longer feed our families”, while others lamented the loss of forest resources and restricted mobility, which curtailed traditional roles⁶⁰. The 2010 Marakilolo resistance and ERA march-protest led by both men and women reflects a collective effort to preserve their cultural heritage and assert their rights. However, these efforts faced repression, including the Ijaw-Gbene arson attack, which residents attributed to the company’s security forces, and unfulfilled promises of infrastructure development.

Mediation attempts, including by Major General Atewe in 2015, failed due to the company’s reluctance to address community demands, the Edo State government’s 2015 order to revoke 13,750 hectares of Okomu’s land was ignored, prompting further appeals to federal authorities. Also, the lack of government intervention and the company’s reliance on military support have perpetuated conflict, leaving the community vulnerable⁶¹.

Concluding, Okomu Oil Palm Company has profoundly impacted the Udo community by driving economic growth, enhancing infrastructure, empowering residents, and promoting environmental sustainability. Through employment, road upgrades, educational support, healthcare facilities, and sustainable practices, Okomu

has elevated Udo's quality of life since the early 2000s. While Okomu's contributions were substantial, the company's operations in Udo have left a legacy of environmental devastation, socioeconomic marginalization, and human rights abuses from 1976 to 2015. The loss of farmlands, pollution of water sources, and forced displacements have eroded the community's cultural and economic foundations. Despite resistance through protests and advocacy, systemic barriers have hindered redress. Addressing these impacts requires robust government intervention, genuine community engagement, and adherence to international standards like RSPO and FPIC. Further research is needed to assess the long-term ecological damage to Okomu National Park and the effectiveness of grievance mechanisms post-2015. The Udo community's struggle highlights the urgent need for equitable development that prioritizes local rights over corporate interests.

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CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS

The inception and operational activities of the Okomu Oil Palm Company Plc within the Udo community, located in Edo State, Nigeria, spanning the period from 1976 to 2015, present a compelling and significant case study for examining the intricate and multifaceted impacts that large-scale agro-industrial enterprises can exert on rural communities. This research, as elucidated in preceding chapters, has undertaken a comprehensive and methodical analysis of the various economic, social, environmental, and cultural transformations that have occurred due to the presence of Okomu in Udo. In order to provide a comprehensive understanding of these transformations, this study has carefully investigated the socio-economic landscape of the community prior to the establishment of the Okomu Oil Palm Company. By establishing a contextual baseline, the research has endeavored to assess the extent of change facilitated by the company's operations in the Udo community. It has explored the myriad ways in which Okomu's activities have positively contributed to local economic development, including job creation, enhancements in agricultural productivity, and improvements in the overall standard of living for residents. Furthermore, the research delves into the broader socio-economic and environmental dynamics that have been influenced by the operation of the Okomu Oil Palm Company. This includes an examination of the intricate relationships between

agribusiness and local social structures, as well as the environmental implications of large-scale oil palm cultivation, which can range from deforestation and biodiversity loss to potential soil degradation and water resource challenges. The findings underscore both the transformative potential of agro-industries and the challenges of balancing economic growth with social equity and environmental sustainability. This final chapter tries to synthesizes the key insights, reflects on their implications, and offers recommendations for sustainable agro-industrial practices in rural Nigeria.

Prior to the establishment of Okomu Oil Palm Company in 1976, the Udo community, like many in Edo State, is known to be a culturally rich and economically self-sufficient society. Rooted in the Benin Kingdom's socio-political framework, Udo was a strategic settlement with a governance system led by the Iyase of Udo, characterized by communal land ownership, subsistence agriculture, and a symbiotic relationship with the surrounding forest ecosystem. The community's reliance on crops like yam, cassava, and maize, supplemented by hunting, fishing, and local trade, sustained a resilient economy. Sacred groves and ancestral lands were not only economic assets but also cultural and spiritual cornerstones, reinforcing Udo's identity as a cohesive, self-sustaining community. The arrival of Okomu Oil Palm Company, initially a Federal Government of Nigeria pilot project, marked a significant shift toward industrial agriculture. The company's establishment was part of a broader

national agenda to boost agricultural productivity and economic diversification through large-scale oil palm cultivation. Over the decades, Okomu grew into one of Nigeria's leading oil palm companies, managing over 15,580 hectares, with 12,500 hectares dedicated to oil palm plantations by 2012. Its transition to a private entity in 1979 and later to a public limited company in 1990 under the Structural Adjustment Programme, coupled with significant investment from the Belgian Socfin Group, positioned it as a major economic player in the region. This growth brought both opportunities and challenges to the Udo community, particularly from 1976 onward, as the company's operations directly intersected with local livelihoods, land use, and environmental sustainability.

As highlighted in the previous chapters , One of the most significant positive impacts of Okomu Oil Palm Company on the Udo community has been its contribution to economic development and job creation. The company's operations have provided employment opportunities for local residents, offering both direct and indirect jobs in plantation management, processing, and related services. These jobs have provided a source of income for many households, contributing to improved living standards for some community members. Additionally, Okomu's investment in infrastructure, such as roads and electricity, has facilitated better connectivity and access to markets, albeit with significant limitations, as discussed later. The

company's economic success is evident in its ability to pay record-high dividends to shareholders by 2013, signaling robust financial performance that indirectly benefits the regional economy through tax contributions and economic activity. For the Udo community, the presence of a major corporation has brought a degree of economic vitality, transforming the area from a primarily agrarian society to one engaged with modern industrial agriculture.

Okomu Oil Palm Company has also made notable strides in community development through its Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives. According to the company's records, it has implemented projects aimed at enhancing rural livelihoods, including the construction of classrooms, community town halls, staff quarters for teachers, and healthcare centers. Other initiatives include drilling boreholes, providing agricultural equipment, installing electricity transformers, and awarding bursaries to students in tertiary institutions. These efforts have addressed critical needs in education, healthcare, and infrastructure, which are often lacking in rural communities like Udo. For instance, Okomu's provision of learning materials to government schools and access to its clinic facilities for community members (excluding medication costs) demonstrate a commitment to improving social welfare. These projects, often developed in consultation with community working committees, have fostered a degree of goodwill and supported the socio-economic fabric of the

Udo community, aligning with the company's stated mission of "responsible tropical agriculture."

Despite these positive contributions, the negative impacts of Okomu Oil Palm Company's operations on the Udo community have been profound and multifaceted, particularly in the areas of land rights, environmental degradation, and social conflict. One of the most contentious issues has been the company's acquisition and use of land, which has led to significant disputes with local communities, including Udo. Reports indicate that Okomu's expansion involved the bulldozing of community farmlands and parts of the Owan Forest Reserve, affecting over 60,000 people across 30 communities in three local government areas. In Udo and neighboring areas like Gbelebu, the company's actions have been accused of disregarding community land rights and prior informed consent, leading to displacement and loss of traditional livelihoods. For instance, the destruction of villages such as Oweike, Agbede, and Ijawcamp in 1998 without adequate compensation left communities devastated, with some residents reporting that chiefs died in frustration due to unannounced bulldozing. These actions have fueled perceptions of land grabbing and eroded trust between Okomu and the Udo community.

Environmental degradation is another significant negative impact associated with Okomu's operations. The conversion of large swathes of forest land into oil palm plantations has led to deforestation, loss of biodiversity, and contamination of local water sources. The Owan Forest Reserve, which borders Okomu National Park, home to species like leopards, chimpanzees, and forest elephants, has been particularly affected. The use of agrochemicals in plantations has polluted rivers, rendering them unusable during the rainy season and posing health risks to communities reliant on these water sources. This environmental toll has disrupted traditional practices such as fishing and farming, which were central to the Udo community's way of life before 1976. While Okomu claims to prioritize environmental sustainability, achieving certifications like ISO 14001:2015 and RSPO in 2020, critics argue that these certifications have not fully addressed the ecological damage caused by its operations, highlighting a gap between the company's stated goals and on-the-ground realities.

Social conflicts, exacerbated by Okomu's use of security forces, have further strained relations with the Udo community. Reports from 2010 to 2011 detail instances where the company employed Nigerian soldiers and military police to enforce land claims, intimidate residents, and restrict access to public roads. In Gbelebu, a neighboring community, Okomu imposed a perpetual injunction barring residents from using a tarred road through its plantations, citing theft of palm fruits.

This restriction forced villagers to use longer, poorly maintained routes, significantly increasing travel times and economic hardship. In Udo, similar restrictions and the locking of community gates from 2010 to 2011 isolated residents, limiting access to markets and essential services. Allegations of human rights abuses, including arrests and criminalization of community leaders like Sunny Ajele, who faced accusations of planning violence, underscore the tense relationship. These actions have fostered a sense of marginalization, with some residents describing themselves as “slaves on their own land” due to restrictive agreements and ongoing surveillance.

Hence, the experience of Udo with Okomu Oil Palm Company offers valuable lessons for sustainable rural development. While large-scale agribusiness can drive economic growth and infrastructure development, it must be balanced with respect for community rights and environmental sustainability. Okomu’s CSR initiatives, such as educational scholarships and health outreach programs, demonstrate the potential for corporate contributions to community welfare. However, these efforts must be scaled up and complemented by policies that protect indigenous land rights, promote inclusive employment, and mitigate environmental impacts. The empowerment of women and youth through skill acquisition programs, as seen in Okomu’s initiatives, is a step toward inclusive development, but it must be accompanied by broader structural reforms to address systemic inequities.

Looking forward, the case of Okomu and Udo highlights the need for ongoing research to assess the long-term impacts of agro-industrial activities on rural communities. Further studies should focus on the ecological damage to the Okomu National Park and the effectiveness of grievance mechanisms post-2015. Evaluating the sustainability of Okomu's smallholder programs and their impact on local food security could provide insights into scalable models for inclusive development. Additionally, research into the role of traditional governance structures, such as the Iyase of Udo, in mediating corporate-community relations could inform strategies for preserving cultural heritage amidst industrialization. The integration of technology, such as GIS mapping for land use planning, could also enhance transparency and equity in land allocation.

In conclusion, the impacts of Okomu Oil Palm Company on the Udo community from 1976 to 2015 reflect the broader challenges of balancing economic development with social and environmental justice in rural Nigeria. The company's contributions to employment, infrastructure, and community welfare have been significant, transforming Udo from a subsistence-based society into one integrated into the formal economy. However, these benefits have been overshadowed by the loss of ancestral lands, environmental degradation, and human rights violations, which have marginalized the community and eroded its cultural foundations. The Udo

community's resilience, demonstrated through protests and advocacy, underscores the importance of community agency in navigating the challenges of industrial agriculture. For Okomu and similar agribusinesses to achieve sustainable development, they must prioritize genuine community engagement, adhere to international standards, and collaborate with government and local stakeholders to ensure that economic progress does not come at the expense of rural livelihoods and ecosystems. This study serves as a call to action for policymakers, corporations, and communities to work together toward a model of development that is inclusive, equitable, and sustainable, ensuring a brighter future for communities like Udo.

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Anonymous	63	Farmer	Udo Community	June 20th 2025.
Mr. Fidelis Olise	48	Okomu staff	Udo Community	April 16th 2025
Grace Osagie	35	Trader	Udo Community	May 27th, 2025.
Idemudia Adesuwa	46	Civil servant	Udo Community	June 20th 2025.
Mr. Micheal Egharevba	42	Farmer	Udo Community	May 27th, 2025.
Mrs. Ekhaton	38	Trader	Udo Community	May 27th, 2025.
Mr. Robinson	53	Civil servant	Udo Community	June 20th 2025.
Sunny Odiase	58	Farmer	Udo Community	June 20th 202

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