



## A Cyclical Impact of Economic Crunch on Forest Reserve Areas of National Park, Akamkpa, Cross River State, Nigeria

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### ABSTRACT

The economic hardship, experienced in Nigeria in recent times, has pushed many, especially the civil servants who were hitherto not farmers into farming in 2024. However, a situation where the salary of the civil servant cannot measure up with the galloping inflation of 32.7%, and Naira exchanging at N1750.00 to a US Dollar as November 2024 has left many civil servants and others who were in white collar jobs to embrace agriculture. Civil servants who were not involved in agriculture have now embraced farming as a way of augmenting their meagre salary. For communities around the National Park at Akamkpa, Cross River State, the option left is to penetrate the core areas of the protected zones of the national forest in spite of the various strategies put in place to protect the forest. The result is that the harsh policies affect the people, the people impact the forest and the degraded forest affects the people when the biodiversity is at risk, threatened or extinct. This also results in poverty on the people. This is the cyclical impact.

**Keywords:** Economic Crunch, Forest Reserve, Protected Area, National Park, Akamkpa, Cross River State.

### Introduction

In any part of the world, the economy of a country has a way of influencing the citizens, particularly the civil servants either negatively or positively. The events unfolding in Nigeria overtime points to the fact that all is not well with the civil servant who are bearing the brunch of the hardship in the country. A situation where the salary of the civil servant cannot measure up with galloping inflation rate of 32.7% with Naira exchanging at N1,750 to a US dollar as at November, 2024 is most unbearable. The above situation has pushed civil/public servants and those who were originally in white collar jobs to agriculture as a way of complementing their meagre salary of N30,000.00 minimum wage. This situation has caused many civil servants in the communities adjourning the National Park to resort to agriculture to augment their meagre-salary.

The consequence of this is the further fragmentation of land into smaller pieces with very low yield per hectare. This is in line with Ukam (2021) and Ukan (2018) in the research work on the impact of population growth on rural resources. The Cross River National Park in the rainforest region, is one of Africa's last remaining forest zones with extremely rich wide variety of flora and fauna species and is known among the 25 biodiversity hotspots in the world. Obongha, Ukam and Upuji (2020).

### Literature Review

There is no gain saying the fact that the economy of a country has a way of affecting the behaviour of its citizens particularly the civil servants because it has consequences on their income. It also determines how well they can take care of their dependents. The workforce (working class) of every society holds the key that determines the wellbeing of the people they cater for, the aged, the youths and the children. It is in view of this that they will do anything including encroaching on the reserved areas to ensure that the dependent population is taken care of. Economy in this circumstance is referring to the state of the country in terms of the production and consumption of goods and services and the supply of money as well as the careful management of resources. In recent times lack of proper and careful management of resources has plunged a lot of Nigerians into doing things that are not expected of law-abiding citizens. For instance, while some people have become lawless, others who cannot bear it have resorted to leaving the country to seek greener pastures outside the country, hence the recent slogan of "japa" meaning run in Yoruba language.

There is yet another group that feels so frustrated that they feel there is no solution to the many economic hardship than for them to take their own lives (suicide). This indeed is the highest level of the impact of the crunch. Taking one's own life is a tragic reactive to stressful life situations this anomic suicide is caused by the lack of social regulation and it occurs during high levels of stress and frustration. This is what many civil servants and other people feel before venturing into agriculture in the protected area to enable them make ends meet. The tropical rainforest is one of the richest ecosystems in the world containing at least half of the plants and animals. It is said to be the home of half of the different flora and fauna in the world according to

UNEP, 1993 in Obongha, Ukam and Upuji (2020). The human activities in Nigeria have increased the rate of forest loss, degradation of soil fertility and deterioration of the environment, especially in protected areas. Protected Area System (PAS) have been used as a strategy to protect biodiversity especially those in the brink of extinction (Obongha, Ukam, Upuji, 2020) protected areas are areas of land and/or sea exclusively dedicated to the protection and maintenance of biodiversity, natural and associated cultural resources which are managed through legal or other effective means (Rotich, 2012; Medonald, 2003). Protected areas include the parks, reserves, strict nature reserves and wilderness among others. According to Obongha, Ukam and Upuji (2020) protected areas are said to arise out of the need to control the biodiversity from its rapid loss and degradation.

Kamau (2004) opines that the greatest problem of protected areas is habitat loss around the edges of forests and others due to agricultural expansion. Although, deforestation started since the advent of civilization and have shown in several areas that it is on the increase due to incessant exploitation of trees and increase in socio-economic activities (Obongha, Ukam, Upuji, 2020). It is also a function of the growing human population and activities propelled by such factors as land tenure system, poverty, demography, inadequate conservation status, development policies and economic incentives (Gandiwa, Matsvayi, Ngwenya, and Edson, 2011). The rapid depletion of forest resources by human activities led to the use of several interventions by the United Nations in admonishing nations of the world to balance the exploitations of forest resources through sustainable development concept (Obongha, Ukam, Upuji, 2020). The adoption of the protected areas system was hoped to curtail the rate of species extinction and degradation (Bustler, 2005). While this idea on its own is a lofty one, it is sad that it is not actually or completely achieving its aim as a result of citizens needs in the face of economic hardship. This economic hardship is another dimension of deforestation drivers. This research is therefore geared towards discovering the extent of its contribution or impact on protected areas encroachment.

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## Materials/Methods

This study adopted a survey research method with questionnaires as the main tool for gathering information. Both primary and secondary sources will be adopted for data collection. The researcher also adopted a discussion group made up of forest rangers (forest guards). These people are in constant touch with those who illegally come from the adjoining communities to carry out activities in the protected areas. The Cross River National Park is made up of two divisions. The Oban Division (established in 1988) and the Okwangwo Division (established in 1991) with a total area of about 4,000 Km<sup>2</sup>. Each of these divisions has the following zones:

- (i) Buffer zone (that is mapped out for the community's use)
- (ii) Transition zone (which has already been cultivated)
- (iii) The core area (zone) (this is the main park itself)

The Cross River National Park is located between Latitudes 5°05' North and 6°29' North and Longitudes 8°15' East and 9°30' East. The study area is in the Southern corners of Nigeria with an area coverage of 280,000.00 (Obongha, Ukam, Upuji, 2020). The study adopted survey method as well as a discussion group made up of rangers who are working in the national park. The survey considered randomly selected members of adjoining villages of the park who are farmers. A total of 150 farmers were selected from different villages that are close to the protected areas of National Park. The Villages that are close to the national park are: - there are 66 villages in the buffer zone surrounding the park, with the villages dependent on the park for their livelihoods. The forest provides millions of people with shelter, medicinal herbs, timber, fuel wood, building materials, clothing and lots more (Yaro, Okon, and Obongha, 2018).

In view of the fact that this forest provides a means of livelihood to the communities around it, human activities have increased the rate of forest loss, degradation of soil fertility and deterioration of the environment. All these problems are the direct result of irrational and unsustainable agriculture, commercial timber logging and fuel wood collection for industrial and domestic uses. The need to conserve the forest is therefore, to secure development while at the same time sustaining the productivity of natural vegetation, protecting wild life, maintaining genetic diversity and avoiding soil and forest degradation. UN-REDD, 2015 in Obongha, Ukam, Upuji (2020).

The demand made on the forest has equally increased as a result of new dimension of deforestation driver called harsh economy policy where the civil servants salary remains stagnant, (no promotion), poor wages and salaries, high taxation, high petroleum prices (as high as N1,800.00 per litre at a time) high cost of transportation, resulting in high cost of food stuffs in the market, very high house rent, folding up of small and medium scale enterprises as well as the folding up of multi-national industrial and business establishments that have withdrawn their services from Nigeria. This has resulted in the loss of jobs, due to reorganization of establishment, retrenchment, high unemployment rate and under employment. To make ends meet, agriculture which hitherto was left in the hands of uneducated, and unemployed youths, old women and men in the rural areas, now receives a boost from the unemployed youth, retrenched civil servants and those who want to augment their lean means of livelihood due to poor salaries with agriculture. This has given rise to an upsurge of farmers in the rural areas with those who live close to the national park in Cross River State, Nigeria venturing into the reserved areas. They have gone beyond buffer zone, through the transition zone into the core areas of the protected forest zones. This study is based on the above new deforestation drivers (Harsh Economic Policy of Government). The study purposively selected a few respondents who are involved in these activities.

**Table 1: Occupation of Respondents**

S/N	Occupation	Frequency	Percentages
1	Civil servant	30	20
2	Business (petty trading)	20	13.33
3	Learning trade	10	6.67
4	Public servant	40	26.67
5	Politician	05	3.33
6	Peasant farmer	45	30.00
		<b>150</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Researcher's Field Work 2024

From table 1 above, out of the sampled population of 150 respondents, randomly selected, 30 respondents (20%) are civil servants, 20 respondents (13.33%) are in business (petty trading), 10 respondents 6.67% are learning trade (apprentices), 40 respondents (26.67%) are public servants, five respondents (3.33%) are politicians, 45 respondents (30.00%) are core peasant farmers: suffice this to mean that other people who are not core farmers also make demands on land.

**Table 2: Reasons why People Engage in Farming**

S/N	Reasons Farming	Frequency	Percentage
1	I have always been a farmer as a means of livelihood	50	33.33
2	No employment	30	20.00
3	No formal education	20	13.33
4	Retrenched worker	15	10.00
5	To augment my meagre civil service salary	10	6.67
6	Traditional land owners	10	6.67
7	I engage in agriculture as a hobby	5	3.33
8	Do not have any other skills	10	6.67
	<b>Total</b>	<b>150</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Researcher's Field Work 2024

Table 2 above presents reasons why people engage in agriculture. 50 respondents (33.33%) have always been farmers as a means of livelihood. 30 respondents (20%) are agriculture because of no employment in the civil service sector. These people may have acquired educational qualifications. 20 respondents (13.33%) do not have any formal education; hence they settle for agriculture 15 respondents (10%) are retrenched workers 10 respondents (6.67%) says to augment their meagre salary.

10 respondents (6.67%) are traditional lands land owners who are the custodians of the land. 5 respondents (3.33%) engage in agriculture as a hobby and 10 respondents (6.67%) say they do not have any other skills or training hence the reason why they engage in farming. Each of this groups in one way or another engage in farming (agriculture) thereby making demands and exerting pressure on land. This pressure helps to push the demand for land in this area beyond the buffer zones of the forest through the transition zone into the core area (the man protected park zone).

**Table 3: How long have you been farming (years of farming)**

S/N	Reasons Farming	Frequency	Percentage
1	Precisely 2024	20	13.33
2	0-5	20	13.33
3	5-10	15	10.00
4	10-15	20	13.33
5	15-20	25	16.67
6	20-25	20	13.33
7	Over 25 years	30	20.00
	<b>Total</b>	<b>150</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Researcher's Field Work 2024

Table 3 above shows how long farmers have farming in their respective locations. Those who embrace farming this year, 2024 is 20 respondents (13.33%) and those who embraced farming for the past five years is also 20 respondents (13.33%). These two groups sum up to 40 respondents (26.66%) suffice this to mean that a total of 40 respondents have added to the farming population. This is interpreted to mean additional demand for land and further fragmentation of the available farms, thereby impoverishing the yield further.

Others who have been in agriculture for the past 5-10 years is 15 respondents, 10-15 years is 20 respondents (13.33%) 15-20 years is 25 respondents (16.67%), 20-25years is 20 respondents (13.33%) and those engaged in agriculture for over 25 years is 30 respondents (20%). The implication of this is further encroachment to the protected core areas of the National Park since the buffer zone and the transition zone has been overstretched. The cyclical impact of the economic crunch in the country on biodiversity is the fact that fact that the Protected Area System (PAS) which was used as a strategy to protect biodiversity from extinction is being undermined and defeated in the face of hunger and adversity.

Many protected areas of land or sea that were exclusively dedicated to the protection and maintenance of biodiversity, natural and associated cultural resources which were managed through legal or other effective means are no longer obeyed. It has become glaringly very clear that in the face of famine and difficulty both legal policies, traditional conservation practices in protecting biodiversity are undermined.

The rapid depletion of forest resources by human activities has led to the use of several interventions by the United Nations in admonishing nations of the world to balance the exploitations of forest resources through sustainable development. The adoption of the protected area system was hoped to curtail the rate of species extinction and degradation (Burlter, 2005 in Obongha; Ukam and Upuji, 2020).

Unfortunately, even this protected area system has failed due to the economic crunch. Suffice this to mean that government harsh economic policies present itself as another deforestation driver. In difficult times, when salaries are not sufficient to sustain the training population in the country, the quickest and best option to fall back on is agriculture and by the extension the forest. The forest has rich biodiversity that are essential for human livelihoods and sustainable development. Fuel wood is the primary source of energy for cooking and heating for 2.6 billion people estimated by the World Bank.

The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment also found that as many as 300 million people, many of whom are very poor, depend for their sustainability on forest ecosystem services for their subsistence and survival (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005). Other non-timber forest products (NTFP) derived from the forest biodiversity, such as cocoa, honey, gums, nuts, fruits, flowers, seeds, snails, mushroom, rattan, fungi, wild meat and berries are all essential for food, building material and medicine are used by indigenous people to sustain their way of life, including culture, traditions and religion (Yaro et al, 2016).

The dependence on the forest land for agriculture is why many of the respondents run to agriculture when white collar jobs and business fails. Ukam (2021) observe that where the population on the land increases, it results in a negative effect on the rural resources such as the excessive fragmentation of land, neglect of basic traditional approaches to conservation, poor yields in both land and marine products, poor income and other social vices.

## Conclusion

At time when government policies are not favourable to the citizens even the legal environmental laws or policies are disobeyed, let alone superstitions beliefs and totemism by the villagers for conservation. It is in view of this circumstances, that the study group that had discussion with the researchers at the national park reported that the indigenous people are so desperate to use the forest even to the core areas that they shot at them (the rangers) to all the indigenous people use their land.

The only way that these land hungers can be controlled to a large extent is through traditional conservation practices that is based on superstition and totemism. Ofcourse, this was the only way that the forest we have today was handed to us by our forebears (forefathers) Ukam and Obongha (2023). Recently, it was also discovered that the village chiefs in some communities do not obey these laws. They intentionally collect bribe as small as a bottle

of whisky to allow “foreigners” enter their forest to harvest wood. It is even worst now when everybody is looking for how to make ends meet because of the harsh times. There is therefore need for government to ensure that friendly economic policies are put in place for the citizens. This is to ensure that what the government was trying to protect (the forest) is lost to economic hardship by desperate community members who desire to make ends meet with their land in the absence of sustainable wage not just minimum wage. Absence of sustainable minimum wage has become a deforestation driver in the protected zone of the national park, Akamkpa, Cross River State.

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