



Okomu oil plantation agriculture coordinator, Billy Ghansah

# INTERVIEW: How climate change affects oil palm production in Nigeria – Expert

*Okomu Oil plantation agriculture coordinator, Billy Ghansah, speaks on how*



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Prior to the discovery of crude oil in commercial quantities in Nigeria, palm oil was a major agricultural export crop and a top foreign exchange earner for the country in the 1950s and 1960s. Nigeria was the largest producer of palm oil in the world but has fallen to the fifth position with an average production of 1.4 million metric tonnes. In this interview with PREMIUM TIMES, Okomu oil plantation agriculture coordinator, Billy Ghansah, speaks on the effects of climate change on oil palm production in Nigeria.

### **PT: How is climate change affecting palm oil production?**

**Ghansah:** **Climate change** is affecting oil palm production in two ways. Oil palm needs a lot of water and we are not getting enough of it. The rainfall pattern has changed. We have fewer days of rainfall and the bulk of it is very intense but when it is intense you don't get what you need. You need more days of rainfall than less days of rainfall. Also, the elongated dry season; that has an impact on our yields generally. Over the past three years, our yields have been dropping compared to the previous times. One will not be able to point his fingers at climate change per se, but then it is the real thing which is happening. Even our rainfall pattern is changing. In terms of total volume, it has not changed that much. But in terms of the pattern, it has changed.

The second thing we have identified is an increase in the variety and population of pests. With an oil



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which are coming up now and we have issues with them. The immediate impact is the fact that we are spending more money on pest control. But the long-term effect is the fact that they would have an impact on yield because they would be attacking the plants.

Our practices have not changed. Somebody might say it is because of practices. Maybe usage of more chemicals. But we don't. We are actually actively reducing the quantity of chemical usage in our plantation.

So my suspicion is maybe due to the fact that there is a change in the environment and you can put your finger on that. Second is the fact that there is more or less an increase in deforestation. I can give you an example of that. Over the last three years, we have had a colony of bats which have taken over part of the plantation. Prior to the deforestation of the western part of Okomu National Park, we never had that problem. So we suspect they (the bats) have been forced to migrate, and they are getting something equivalent to what they are getting in the forest reserve. Maybe that's why they are here. Really, they have devastated part of the plantation but these are things one has to live with, look forward to it and manage it.

**PT: So are there specific climate-smart models you are now adopting to upscale palm fruit production within the plantation?**

**Ghansah:** The problem with oil palm is that it is a long-term crop. Whatever you have planted now cannot be uprooted for you to put new ones in place. So if we look at it, we have long and short-term strategies that we are using.





The short-term strategy is to try to track the kind of pests which are now coming up and try to understand their ecology and biology, so as to manage them better. The second one has to do with the fact that we have to reduce chemical usage like I said earlier on and look at more eco-friendly chemicals which we are still investigating. Also, we are now concentrating on soil health to see how we can improve the soil that we have. Those are short-term.

But the long-term strategy is that we are breeding for climate resilience. An example is that we alongside our partners are looking at drought-tolerant varieties of oil palm which are slow-growing and which will be able to withstand the long dry weather that we are now encountering. We are also looking at developing best management practices. If we were taking some things for granted we will not be able to, we have to do it better now. And we hope that we can pass on this knowledge to farmers that we are working with of late.

**PT: In terms of the change in the weather pattern over the years that you have observed, have you been able to engage or provide any form of sensitisation to smallholder farmers that you are working with concerning these changes?**

**Ghansah:** Yes we are. We, along with our partners, 2-scale and IDH, started a smallholder crop aggregation system here where we buy crops from farmers. Our main aim in doing that was to impart our knowledge to them because the biggest support we can give our farming communities is

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agronomic support will help them, and it starts with better planting materials, and support harvesting and cultivation activities generally. That is what we are doing. We just started and along the line, it will become a bigger thing. For now, it is a very small thing, but we hope that it will go up and we will get a better return from whatever we are doing now.

**PT: Has there been a time or period of the year when you expected a larger production output but there was a decline?**

**Ghansah:** Of course, there have been periods like that. Like I told you, in our place, yields have been dropping over the past three years. It is not very very big, but we do notice it. This can have a significant impact on our bottom line because we have buyers of our products and we might give them forecasts which are not realised. Therefore, we need to note all these issues. So yes, there is dropping, but it is not that big.

**PT: The increase in pests population like you mentioned, how is it like?**

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**Ghansah:** Yes there is an increase in pests and varieties. We have never had bats as pests in this place but I am getting them now. I am getting pests like Mots called “Latoya”, which is in oil palm but it was never a problem before now. It has become a problem. And then I asked myself if I am doing something different from before. No!



*An oil palm plantation*

So why would the population (pests) come up? It is because their alternative sources of pro<sup>table</sup> feeding have been lost due to the loss of forest reserves and the fact that there is more intensified

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A lot of the farmers are using huge amounts of chemicals in their activities because they don't get labour and it is more cost-effective for them. But it has a downside which unfortunately they are not aware of, (especially) in terms of their health and their impacts on the environment.

**PT: So what are the sustainable alternatives you think these farmers can adopt going forward?**

**Ghansah:** I just gave you an example. If a man is using chemicals, he should know about the impact of such on the environment and the quantities he has to use. I remember meeting a farmer who said she uses half a litre of glyphosate in 20 litres of water. This means she is using about a five or six per cent mixing rate (if I am not wrong), whereas we use a one per cent mixing rate. And her argument is simple; she kills everything that is a competitor to her plants.

But in a plantation or a farming environment, if you look at our forefathers, they never meant to kill everything. They coexist with nature and that's the best practice. When you do that ( I.e using more chemicals), you will tend to build resistant varieties which would then mean you need more chemicals to be used.

The second effect is that most of these chemicals are not safe when it affects human beings, so you have to be careful. Our farmers don't have any idea about this. But this lady was wearing a skirt. She will just go to the river to collect water to mix with her chemicals. One other thing that makes her practice not sustainable also is the fact that the water she was using was muddy. It contains clay particles which will inactivate the chemicals, so she needs more chemicals to get the results.

So there is a huge room for improvement in terms of tailoring messages to farmers to do the right thing. Unfortunately, chemical usage has come to stay. The best way to do it now is to manage it so they don't misuse it.



**PT: What is your message to farmers who are into oil palm production for this season?**

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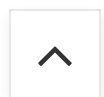
But we don't deal with all oil palm farmers within the country. Obviously, they would need support everywhere they are. And I hope the support services that are provided by the government are also concentrated in those areas because chemical usage and its abuse is a big problem in mostly our farming communities now. Every chemical is hazardous. The problem is how to use it safely, which is important. They (smallholder farmers) need a lot of support because they don't know. It is not their fault. If you use poor-quality water, you will be forced to use more chemicals for it to be effective.

**PT: How did the recent flood incident that ravaged communities across the country affect your Banga sourcing?**

**Ghansah:** No, it did not affect us. We are far away from areas where flooding would normally take place. Most of our farmers have planted far away from riverbanks. Of course, that is the reason why they are safer. But the flooding did affect a lot of farmers. Don't forget also that an oil palm farmer is not solely an oil palm farmer, he has other crops. It did affect some of the people who are into rice cultivation, and fish farms and also made travelling difficult because there are a lot of roadways which were damaged and they could not move around easily. Some of them lost crops which they could not move out during the flooding situation.

**PT: How did it affect your company's shipment of the final product?**

**Ghansah:** It didn't have a big impact because most of our market is the manufacturing bases in Lagos and other areas in the east. They managed to come and collect them. There were no issues. But I don't think their distribution was that easy to manage during that period because they distribute their products all over the country and there are places where they would have difficulties.







Packaged Okomu oil

## PT: How has the ongoing Russia-Ukraine crisis affected palm oil production and prices?

**Ghansah:** The Russia-Ukraine war obviously had an initial impact on the prices of commodities. It's for all commodities and not just oil palm. It had a "positive" impact in pushing up the prices but it was mostly speculation. People have now come to know the reality and they have accepted the condition as it is. Therefore, you will realise that prices are more stable than before when it was going up. It is more stable and it will continue for some time like that. Stability does not mean higher prices, unfortunately. We would have expected a higher price but it is not like that. The price rose to \$1,800 per tonne and it dropped to around \$1,200 and below even. Besides that, the prices are more stable. That is where it has affected oil palm prices.

But the other side is the prices of fertiliser which have shot up to the roof. It has tripled. All agricultural producers and even we are also feeling the impact in terms of fertiliser prices. From muriate of Potash to Urea (urea is from the petroleum industry), everything is being affected.

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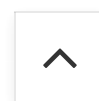
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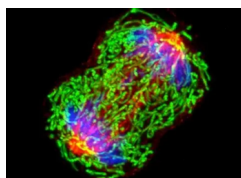
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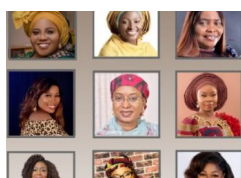
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