Presco Plc, a member of the SIAT Group, is a company operating in Nigeria producing and processing palm oil for the domestic market. The company plans to implement a sustainable project for new oil palm development on about 10,000 ha of land in Edo State. In line with the RSPO initiative, it aims to promote biodiversity conservation and ecosystem services, and enhance local development and social wellbeing. Feedback from this project will make a contribution to field testing, for implementation of the principles and criteria related to the responsible development of new plantings.

Presentation of the project

Main objectives and progress so far
The company, in collaboration with CIRAD, has investigated the agricultural capacity of the area and addressed social and environmental concerns, with emphasis on High Conservation Value identification. Environmental and social impact assessments have been carried out. A land-use map and a conservation action plan will be issued. Local development will be enhanced, notably through social actions and an outgrowers scheme. Ecological and socio-economic monitoring will be ensured.

Methodology
To assess the foreseeable impact of Presco’s extension and to identify potential measures that could lessen negative impacts and enhance positive impacts, it seemed important to:
- Assess the agricultural capacity of the concession,
- Identify its conservation value (exceptional or critical ecological attributes, ecosystem services, social functions),
- Understand local environmental exploitation dynamics.

Biophysical and ethno-ecological approaches were combined and outside expertise was called in.

Overview of the natural environment and socio-economic dynamics
- A complex and differentiated human environment, with high land pressure,
- A territory divided into two zones:
  - The northern area, cultivated lands of very low conservation value but good agricultural capacity,
  - The southern area, partly covered with degraded secondary rain forest and wetlands, still hosting valuable biodiversity but threatened by over-logging and farming encroachment.
- Presco activities will lead to considerable changes in the socio-economic and natural environment, both positive and negative.

With strong support from all stakeholders and their involvement in the project, it may be an opportunity for conservation of the Ologbo forest.

Implementation of the RSPO “Principles and Criteria” (P&C)

The elements tested concern Principle 7 “Responsible development of new plantings”, but also related criteria in Principles 2, 5 and 6.

Data gathering for impact assessment and HCV identification
- Formal Environmental Impact Assessments are not sufficient to comply with RSPO P&C.
- Biodiversity assessments are difficult to carry out: lack of existing data, time and human resources needed for baselines surveys,
- Participatory mapping exercises may amplify disputes about land issues.

Decision-making and implementation
- Land issues are not easy to tackle when it comes to overlapping legal and customary rights,
- Knowledge about landscape ecology and conservation biology is often lacking for decision making on landscaping for environmental and conservation purposes: riparian buffer zone width, size and shape of wildlife corridors or refuges, population viability characteristics, etc,
- The roles and responsibilities of oil palm growers in conservation matters must be clarified,
- Monitoring: indicators are lacking.

Conclusion

Most areas covered by the P&C are clearly addressed in the guidance document, but some topics need clearer definition or targets, with local adaptation. The biggest issues are related to biodiversity assessment, land tenure and the participatory process. There is a strong need for indicators and thresholds for decision-making.

References
