
[OIL - Land grab for oil: The crude reality of oil drilling in the Niger Delta](#)

While land grabbing is generally associated with the taking over of land for large scale monoculture plantations, grown for export-crops or conservation projects like REDD, the Ogoni people in the Niger Delta have faced another form of land grab – the loss of their territories, traditional lands, fertile mangrove and river systems to the oil companies that have been devastating the region for decades.

A recent visit of EJOLT participants (see EJOLT blog <http://www.ejolt.org/2013/04/crude-justice-ecocide-in-the-niger-delta/>) to the villages of Goi and Bodo City in Ogoniland provided a shocking reminder of the cost that communities pay when they live in the vicinity of some of the most profitable oil drilling in the Niger Delta. The visit also involved experiencing the dignity and determination with which Ogoni communities have for decades been demanding justice and that oil companies clean up the oil they have let spill into mangroves, onto fields; oil that has seeped into the soil and crept into the tissue of people condemned to living with oil destruction on an unimaginable scale, and from which they derive no benefit but for which they bear an immense cost. “They only came to put a sign saying this land is contaminated, and to keep off”, comments a 58 year old resident who had to leave his village after an oil spill rendered life in the village unviable. “They didn’t clean up anything. Nobody knows the levels of contamination and pollution in our communities.”

The decade long struggle for justice continues, because the gross injustice inflicted on the communities in the Niger Delta continues: Each year, the equivalent of one Exxon Valdez tanker full of crude oil is allowed to spill into the mangroves, rivers and soils of the Niger Delta. In volume terms, the oil that spilled into the Gulf of Mexico caused by the explosion that wrecked BP's Deepwater Horizon rig in 2010 was less than the oil leaking out of the Niger Delta's network of terminals, pipes, pumping stations and oil platforms every year. And yet, these spills have been happening almost unnoticed, with no major headlines in international press devoted to them, and with companies, governments and consumers of Niger Delta oil preferring ignorance over action for justice to those affected by the decades of oil spills. Without this international attention, the cost to people, communities, to rivers, mangroves and the soils on which food continues to be grown remain invisible to those of us who use the products of oil that shape everyday life, in particular in the centers of consumption.

Oil spills have been occurring with increasing regularity in the Niger Delta as the oil infrastructure ages but they have been a constant reality that accompanied oil extraction since Shell started pumping oil in Nigeria in the late 1950s. “Since large scale oil exploration started in the Niger Delta in 1958, there have been over 4,000 oil spills in the Niger Delta – and not one of them has been cleaned up”, explained Godwin Ojo, director of Environmental Rights Action, who support communities affected by the destruction from oil drilling in Ogoniland. Over 400 km of ageing, often rusty pipelines at risk of rupture, several hundred drilling sites, many poorly dismantled after they are taken out of production, more than a hundred gas flaring sites - formally banned in 1984 and declared “unconstitutional” by the Nigerian supreme court in 2005 yet they continue burning because it is cheaper for the companies to flare rather than capture the gas and turn it into electricity – security forces, often armed and involved in conflicts that claim the lives of hundreds of people annually, have turned into a daily struggle what used to be a good life. A life of plenty in a region where fertile

mangroves (see Bulletin 151) provided food for both subsistence and for sale at the local markets. "Life expectancy in Nigeria hovers above 50 years, nearly 20 years below the world average. But in the communities around the oilfields, it is 41 years. A United Nations Environment Program report on the Ogoni region found water with 900 times the safe level of carcinogens. Local complaints of health problems include respiratory diseases and skin lesions, drinking wells poisoned with benzene. With acid-rain corroding the tin roofs of the houses, even the rainwater is too toxic to drink. "There was always food", several residents remarked. Throughout the delta, communities continued with their traditional agriculture of rice, cassava, yams and sugar. They fished periwinkles, crabs, other seafood and fish from the creeks. "But when the spills happened, life in the mangroves was destroyed. The choice we have today is to eat nothing or to eat food we know will kill us", a villager in the now abandoned village of Goi remarked.

The 'spills' that residents of the now abandoned village of Goi refer to are the 2008-09 oil spills when "oil was left shooting into the air for more than two months, in fountains up to two storeys high." Over five years later, the fishing boats still sit along the shores of Bodo creek in Bodo City, as if the spill had happened recently. Residents expected Shell, the company whose pipelines ruptured and caused the spill, to stop the oil spewing and clean up the damage so the boats could be taken out to fish again soon. But the clean-up never happened, and a group of villagers filed a case against the Anglo-Dutch transnational Shell in a Dutch court (see Bulletin 187). On 30 January 2013, the Dutch court ruled that Shell was responsible for polluting the Niger Delta, affecting heavily the lives of people at Ikot Ada Udo in Akwalbom State. But the court, inexplicably also ruled that in the case brought by villagers of Goi – who had suffered from exactly the same, and possibly even more extensive environmental destruction as the people in Ikot Ada Udo - Shell was not liable because supposedly Shell had done enough to maintain their pipelines and that the spills were the result of 'sabotage' by people that were stealing oil. "When Shell eventually came we thought they would say something reasonable. But the reverse was the case. We only decided to go to the court system by the time we were pressed to the wall. We have now decided that justice must be done to that legal battle." And a fellow villager remarked: "We have not got justice but at least our case has been heard." Villagers in Goi and the organisations that supported their case are preparing to appeal the decision in favour of Shell, so they will not only be heard but also receive justice.

Seeing, smelling and feeling the coarse coat of crude oil that countless spills have spewed over the fertile soils and mangroves surrounding Goi, Bodo City and the many other communities affected by the destruction that oil has brought to the Niger Delta, reinforced the need to strengthen the call spearheaded by the OilWatch network to "Leave Oil beneath the Soil, Coal in the Hole and Tar Sands in the Land" – not just because doing otherwise will deny future generations the ability to avoid runaway climate change, but also because communities like those in Bodo City and the Ghost village of Goi have for far too long been bearing the cost so "companies such as Shell continue to reap some of the highest profits of any corporation in the world in 2012", some US\$28.6bn or about US\$2m an hour.

Article based on:

- (1) Notes from WRM visit to villages of Goi, Bodo City in March 2013
- (2) Getting away with Ecocide: Shell in the Niger Delta. Leah Temper. EJOLT - Environmental Justice Project <http://www.ejolt.org/2013/04/crude-justice-ecocide-in-the-niger-delta/>
- (3) UNEP Environmental Assessment of Ogoniland. <http://www.unep.org/disastersandconflicts/CountryOperations/Nigeria/EnvironmentalAssessmentofOgonilandreport/tabid/54419/Default.aspx>

