
Forests, oil and energy: time to re-capture our governments!

On 10 November 1995, it should be remembered by all who struggle for social and environmental justice that the Nigerian military junta executed Ken Saro-Wiwa and other eight Ogoni People leaders. They challenged, resisted and struggled against the severe negative impacts of oil extraction on their communities, while defending their territories and livelihoods. This should never be forgotten.

This also motivated the Oilwatch network and the World Rainforest Movement (WRM) to dedicate the present electronic issue of the WRM bulletin of November to the struggle of Saro-Wiwa and his comrades, as well as to give visibility to the many other struggles around the globe of communities against the very destructive oil industry, with a special attention on those struggles affecting forest and forest-dependent communities. This bulletin is also a renewed appeal for the Oilwatch call “to keep the oil in the soil, the coal in the hole and the gas under the grass”, as well as to alert that we all should engage in a broad discussion in our communities and societies about the dominant concept of “energy” that is imposed on us and that is destroying our planet.

The transition towards a post-fossil era is more than urgently needed. At the same time, we should reflect on this model as a whole, so that it does not put at risk our livelihoods or increase injustices with false “renewable energy” solutions that are being proposed at the international level by governments – like agrofuels. We should also reflect on what is the “energy” that we want and need.

Extracting oil in tropical forest areas is maybe one of the most contradictory and violent activities one can imagine for a tropical forest and for the communities that depend on it. The contaminating capacity of oil for such a bio diverse but also fragile ecosystem is too huge to describe in words. This is also true for the level of repression, often involving the military, that these communities suffer when they stand up against the tremendous profit-making activities of giant oil corporations. The repressions are the same, and produce victims every day, irrespective of whether the companies are private, public or a mix of both. Oil and energy corporations in general are some of the biggest corporations in the world. They have the strong support of governments, especially interested in the official and less official “royalties” they can earn from their activities, while repeating the same vague and false discourse that by supporting oil extraction, they promote “development” and the “alleviation of poverty”. Even if communities and country populations get benefits in some situations, the damage of oil extraction remains unacceptably high in terms of all the impacts it provokes, now and in future.

It is no surprise that the Yasuni initiative is located exactly in a tropical forest region, unique and with an enormous importance and diversity. By August this year, the Ecuadorian government affirmed that it was forced to start oil exploitation in this area, arguing that it would apply so-called “best practices” that would cause “minimal impacts”. President Rafael Correa alleged that he was forced to extract oil because of the lack of interest of governments to finance the proposal of non-extraction that would pay for a part of the “lost” revenues. But what Correa forgot was the opinion of the many people who fully supported the initiative, in Ecuador and around the world.

This Yasuni initiative created an overwhelming interest and recognition from people, organizations and movements that support and struggle for a socially and environmentally just world. Therefore, the Ecuadorian government's decision illustrates the perverse way our world is functioning today: corporations have captured our governments and the real concerns of the people and the environment are considered to be of less importance than the profits of corporations and revenue of governments.

There is an urgent need to liberate our governments. The people need to capture their governments!

Oil is a global menace and by being the main driver of global warming it is causing disasters around the world – far beyond the communities living in the oil fields. The recent disaster in the Philippines, Somalia and even Canada, can be adjudged to be consequences of reckless burning of fossil fuels, even if scientists say they cannot definitively draw that conclusion. What is happening is not only the result of typhoons, cyclones or hurricanes but rather of climate change, of an increasing vulnerability of communities because their governments continue promoting forest-destroying activities like oil extraction, mining and logging.

But are we not living in times of social and environmental corporate responsibility? Are we not in the REDD+ era that has again put forests in the center of the environmental debate? Why can the word not listen to the wisdom of the owners of the forests? Increasing evidence continue to show that REDD+ is a false solution because it has the in-built logic of "compensating" destruction and pollution by preservation elsewhere and this results, at the end of the day, in more emissions, in more forest destruction and land grabbing.

Oil extraction is one of the direct and indirect causes of deforestation that remains unchallenged under the REDD+ scheme, while some of the oil companies are already benefiting from REDD-type projects that have become part of their business. Acre in Brazil is one the place in the world where REDD is most advanced. Oil extraction activities are now coming into Acre just as it also is entering into other conserved forest areas in Brazil and the Amazon. We can safely say that REDD+ and oil do not contradict: they go hand-in-hand, while presenting themselves under a 'smokescreen' of corporate and social responsibility, and as part of a "green economy." While the language gets green the violations of people's rights continue unabated.

This bulletin also reflects on what energy is actually about, as well as what is the energy that we want to have in the future? What can we learn from forest-dependent communities where many still maintain their autonomy and do not depend on our centralized corporate-driven energy generation and supply systems? The death of Ken and his comrades, 18 year ago in Nigeria, will not be in vain if we can push for and put "our energy" into building broader movements in all countries and become connected as strong local and global networks and movements to build livelihoods, including energy forms, that are environmentally and socially just. If we do we will definitely be on our way to re-capturing our governments!

Oilwatch and WRM