

THE CURSE OF BLACK GOLD

Some of the most severe environmental problems in the world are caused during the exploration, retrieval, and transport of oil. As the world's demand for oil has grown rapidly over the past decades, so too has the search for new sources and the intensity of production. Indigenous populations and minority communities across the world have consequently found their land to be of renewed interest to governments and international companies in search of untapped resources. These communities have a right to the land that has sustained them for centuries, and a right to a voice when decisions that impact their communities are taken. All too frequently these rights are ignored and their voices are drowned out by competing interests.

In Southern Nigeria the indigenous Ogoni people are situated in the heart of Nigeria's large oil production industry. Instead of development and poverty reduction however;

OIL EXTRACTION HAS BROUGHT THE LOCAL POPULATION TO THE BRINK OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL DISASTER

Oil spills, pipeline leaks, the dumping of waste from the production process, and gas flaring have all contributed to widespread environmental devastation across the region.

ONCE FERTILE LAND HAS BECOME TOO POLLUTED TO FEED THE LOCAL POPULATION, AND ONCE PLENTIFUL FISH-STOCKS HAVE ALL BUT DISAPPEARED

Vital rainforest and mangroves are being destroyed at a frightening pace as a direct result of oil drilling, and although these are central to the livelihood of the Ogoni people, it is frequently overlooked by those leading the extraction and refining process.

Shell Oil has repeatedly been implicated in this damage to the region's environment. Although they were all but ordered to close down their oil-producing facilities in the region ten years ago following protests lead by the Ogoni, the company has continued operations with the support of the Nigerian government.

Confrontations between local communities, the Nigerian Government and multinational corporations culminated in a period of violence in the mid-1990s that shocked many. A number of local activists were killed following local demonstrations against companies and their practices.

THE OGONI ACTIVIST AND AUTHOR KEN SARO-WIWA, FORMER CHAIRPERSON OF THE UNPO GENERAL ASSEMBLY, IS PERHAPS THE MOST FAMOUS VICTIM OF THE STRUGGLE FOR THE RIGHTS OF THE OGONI PEOPLE

His execution is however but part of an extensive and ongoing catalogue of human rights abuses. Local communities continue to protest their exclusion from the decision making processes, despite the burden they and their environments are forced to bear.

This pattern repeats itself elsewhere. The Ahwazi Arabs of Iran have long suffered the destructive effects of the pollution of their local rivers, and the population of Chechnya struggles daily with the consequences of mass leakages that have released an estimated 30 million barrels of oil into local agricultural land and groundwater, destroying many fish-stocks and local livelihoods.

UNPO works to raise awareness of the local costs of oil extraction, giving local communities and opportunity to voice their concerns to the international community. This, it is hoped, will help elevate local communities to equal negotiating partners when economic decisions which affect their environments are taken.

