



Leaving the oil in the soil – Communities connecting to resist oil extraction and climate change

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Resistance is advocacy for positive, participatory and inclusive change. The barefaced rape of Africa requires continued resistance in forms appropriate to each circumstance. Without resistance, Africa will stay in the pot, like the proverbial frog in the pan, barely noticing the rising heat among so many other survival considerations, until she is cooked in the cauldron.

The web of resistance building across the continent suggests that the strongest thread will be the deliberate struggle for democratic accountability.

This call is for all citizens of the world. It does not matter how minute or benign the injustices around us may be, every objective situation demands that we mobilise forces, resist those injustices and collectively work and bring about the much-needed transformation.

Experience in the field shows that resistance to destructive extraction has to be built one block at a time. When all blocks link together, a wall forms – sometimes protecting a whole nation – to block the tide of rapacious exploitation.

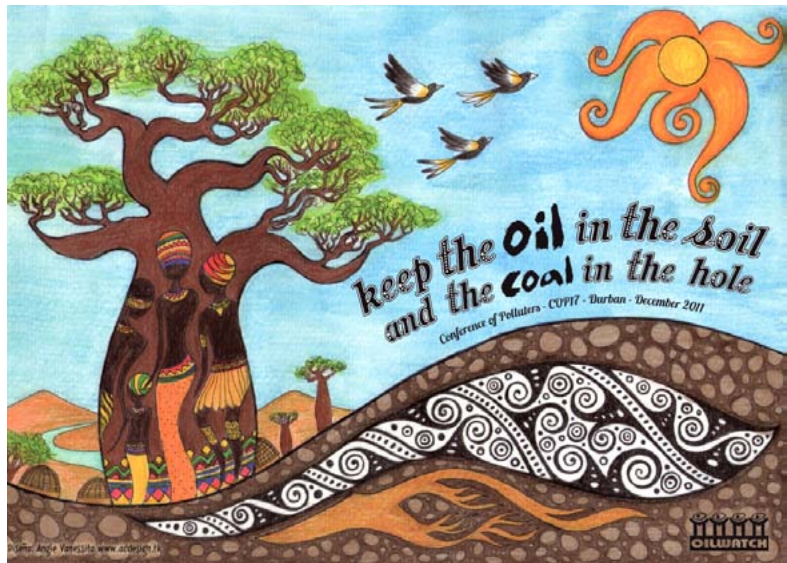
International mobilisation to leave the oil in the soil

One of the key struggles in relation to both climate change and community rights is that against the extractive, fossil industry. This powerful, profitable industry may seem invincible, but is at the heart of the problem and must be effectively challenged, just as slavery once constituted the core of colonial economies, but over decades of principled and increasingly pervasive social struggle was eventually turned into a relic of the past. Civil society groups are now organising and building movements across continents.

This article draws on Nnimmo Bassey's book *To cook a continent: Destructive Extraction and the Climate Crisis in Africa* (2012).

One of the major civil society responses to the cooking of the planet was the 1996 founding of Oilwatch International, a South-South network. It took its first steps in Quito, Ecuador and spread its wings across the world, and includes groups mainly in the South, but some in the global North as well. The signal difference that Oilwatch made was that it gave voice and solidarity to community organisations desperately trying to defend their environments. Through the work of Oilwatch, communities and groups join each other's campaigns, exchange critical information, express solidarity and build further on each other's successes. Although pragmatic in its demands, Oilwatch remains resolute against destructive fossil-fuel extraction.

'Keep the Oil in the Soil and the Coal in the Hole' - Design by Angie Vanessa Cárdenas for Oilwatch.



Oilwatch was incubated in the offices of Acción Ecológica, an organisation of activists passionate about the health of the Ecuadorian environment, objecting deeply to the environmental pollution in the Ecuadorian Oriente and ready to work with communities to demand change.

An early example of Oilwatch's activism is the case of Yasuni ITT, pioneered by Accion Ecologica. Ecuador's forests sit above extensive, yet un plundered oil reserves, with the Yasuni National Park being one of the most biodiverse spots on our planet. Oilwatch deepened the campaign to 'Keep the Oil in the Soil' in order to preserve Yasuni and resist oil exploitation. Ecuador is now asking the international community to compensate the country in exchange for keeping the oil below ground. As Ivonne Yáñez of Accion Ecologica explains:

Our economy depends on oil income. So we say, OK, let's create a solidarity fund with the industrialised countries giving money to this fund. This is why Germany offered \$50 million per year for thirty years, and other countries such as Italy and Spain have also made offers... We have been promoting, since the beginning, a moratorium on oil activities. This is the same: a moratorium, keeping oil in the soil, and declaring people and territories free of oil. We want to have nations emancipated from the dependence on oil and other fossil fuels. We have been growing up, and we have evolved this new concept of a post-oil civilization: Keeping the Oil in the Soil, the Coal in the Hole, the Tar Sands in the Land. (Goodman interview, 2009)

Inspiring struggles for environmental justice pop up in many parts of the world and there is an urgent need to weave these together into a global force.



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These kinds of calls to action will get stronger and wider. Inspiring struggles for environmental justice pop up in many parts of the world and there is an urgent need to weave these together into a global force to liberate Mother Earth from the claws of miners and speculators.

Take also the example of the August/September 2011 protests at the gates of the White House in the US against a proposed tar sand pipeline to link the diggings in Canada to refineries in the US. The proposed Keystone XL pipeline is designed to transport 700,000 barrels of crude oil per day to delivery points in Oklahoma and southeastern Texas. The 36-inch pipeline would consist of about 327 miles of pipeline in Canada and 1,384 miles in the US.¹

These protests quickly echoed around the world as activists joined in solidarity in Brazil, Egypt, Germany, India, Peru and South Africa. The internationalist nature of environmental justice protests points the way to redirecting power relations in a world with values skewed against nature and against the less powerful.

Protesters are concerned about the catastrophic impacts of tar sands on the climate as well as the impacts of the pipeline and related toxic substances on water resources and wildlife. There have been reports of a rise of rare cancers among First Nation peoples of Canada who live close to the tar sands fields. According to Tom Goldtooth, executive director of the Indigenous Environmental Network:

Our Indigenous-Native Nations of the U.S. and Canada must unite to oppose the Keystone XL pipeline and come together to find local, clean, renewable energy to reduce our carbon footprint and spur the

¹ See <http://www.thinkglobalgreen.org/keystone.html>

economy. There are too many major safety, environmental and public health hazards possible in the Keystone XL Pipeline project. The cost and risks of building an oil pipeline across our traditional homelands with important aquifers, waterways, natural lands and wetlands is too great at this time. Our homelands within the planned corridor of this pipeline have many cultural and historically significant areas that have not thoroughly been assessed and are in danger of being destroyed. The negative and very destructive human rights impacts of the Keystone XL pipeline transporting dirty oil from the tar sands region of northern Canada have not adequately been assessed in the final EIS [Environmental Impact Statement]. First Nations in the tar sands region have consistently been making reports of devastation of their environment, their waters, air, and more recently their health.²

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Legal challenges have also been a tool in communities' fights to reclaim their land, air, water. A case against Texaco was first brought before a New York court in 1993, and was later moved to Ecuador after successful pressuring by Chevron, which had bought Texaco in 2001 and so inherited its liabilities. Justice was finally announced in 2011: an US\$8.6 billion fine was imposed on Chevron for heavily polluting the Ecuadorian Amazon through serial oil spills between 1964 and 1990. That fine doubled after Chevron failed to apologise to the impacted peoples as required by the judgement and to pay 'moral reparations' to the Ecuadorian government.

Chevron Texaco also stands accused of atrocious violations of human rights in the Ilaje communities of the Niger Delta. In one incident, on 28 May 1998 at Parabe oil platform, a group of unarmed youths carrying out a peaceful protest experienced summary execution, torture and want destruction of their property. Chevron's assaults on them involved the use of Nigerian military aboard helicopters provided by the company. The case unfolded in the US District Court in San Francisco, and took eight and a half years to come to trial, which lasted four weeks. Astoundingly, the jury ruled against the plaintiffs in *Boweto et al. v. Chevron*, but the context certainly highlighted the blatant and pervasive socioeconomic, ecological and political injustices in this area.³

2 <http://www.ienearth.org/stop-keystone-xl/index.html>

3 Order Denying Bill of Costs. Judge Susan Illston. Case 3:99-cv-02506-SI Document 2315 File 04/22/2009. (*Larry Bowoto v. Chevron Corporation et al.* at the United States District Court, Northern District of California).

Struggles against oil extraction in Africa

One of the worst gas flares in the Niger Delta is at a former Shell facility at Oben on the border of Delta and Edo states. These have been roaring and crackling non-stop for over 20 years, since Shell first lit them. The flared gas comes from the crude oil extracted from the oilwells in the Oben field. Just as at more than 200 other flow stations across the Niger Delta, these gas flares belch toxic elements into the atmosphere, poisoning the environment and the people.

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Elaine Gilligan

The number and regularity of oil spills make a mockery of claims of adherence to acceptable standards by any of the corporations operating in the Niger Delta. Although oil spill records differ, depending on the source, all of them show that the volumes of toxins released into the environment are incredibly high. And renowned Nigerian environmental law professor Margaret Okorududu-Fubara (1998: 815) has estimated that between 1976 and 1990 there were a total of 2,800 spill incidents, as a result of which 2,104,993 barrels of crude oil were spilled into the Niger Delta.

The Delta region of Nigeria is reputed to be one of the most polluted places on Earth. A UNEP report commissioned by the government of Nigeria to assess the environment of Ogoniland was finally made available in August 2011 after taking 14 months to complete. Among the key findings are:

In at least 10 Ogoni communities where drinking water is contaminated with high levels of hydrocarbons, public health is seriously threatened. . . In one community, at Nisikioken Ogale, in western Ogoniland, families are drinking water from wells that are contaminated with benzene – a known carcinogen – at levels over 900 times above World Health Or-

ganisation guidelines. The site is close to a Nigerian National Petroleum pipeline. UNEP scientists found an 8cm layer of refined oil floating on the groundwater that serves the wells. This was reportedly linked to an oil spill which occurred more than 6 years ago. (UNEP, 2011)

After reading the UNEP report, in the knowledge that oil exploitation was halted in Ogoniland in 1993, it is easy to conclude that other communities in the Niger Delta are as badly damaged, if not more so, given that new pollution events are still occurring.

The apogee of non-violent organising in Nigeria was the Ogoni struggle championed by the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), which first organised in August 1990. Under the charismatic leadership of Ken Saro-Wiwa, MOSOP became an Ogoni mass movement and galvanised support from both within and beyond Nigeria. The movement also had active youth, women and student wings. It was a force that could not be ignored.

By 1993, the Ogoni people had excluded Shell from their land. The November 1995 hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa, after a kangaroo court handed down a death sentence on trumped-up charges of involvement in the murder of four Ogoni leaders, intensified the resolve of the Ogoni people, and they have prevented Shell from returning to this land and extracting the oil the company so coveted.



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If Shell is right in asserting that no other oil company in Nigeria has a better social, environmental and other record, then no oil company should be allowed to operate in the Delta. The Ogoni have a strong case for insisting that their oil must be left underground, as civil society groups, including the recently formed Ogoni Civil Society Platform and the Ogoni Solidarity Forum, demand.

Other civil society groups have come forward with variations on this demand. Environmental Rights Action/Friends of the Earth Nigeria (ERA) has made a proposal on how to leave Nigerian oil in the soil without causing an upheaval for the national treasury. The organisation further suggests that this proposal can be replicated for any African country and can be adjusted to suit local realities.

By keeping new oil in the soil, ERA suggests, Nigeria would keep the equivalent volume of greenhouse gases out of the atmosphere. This would be a direct measure to curb global warming through the infallible technique of carbon sequestration. No technology transfer would be required, nor would any international treaty or partnership. According to ERA, were

Nigeria to trade that amount of carbon using any of the available market mechanisms for tackling climate change, such as the so-called Clean Development Mechanism, the country might earn income from keeping the oil underground. However, ERA does not support the use of market mechanisms for such purposes. Rather, it suggests that the curtailing of crude oil theft and massive capital flight from Nigeria would boost the economy and offset the 'loss' of projected revenue from crude. The proposal also includes a domestic crude oil tax or solidarity fund into which each Nigerian would pay according to ability (an average US\$156 per year has been estimated to suffice) (Bassey, 2012:126). A climate debt paid by the industrialised world to those areas hardest hit by climate change would be another crucial strategy to ensure that areas like the Niger Delta are cleaned up at the expense of those who have benefited from its resources.

There is a strong logic for leaving the oil in the soil:

- » Retain carbon in the soil, thereby tackling climate change
- » No oilspills and gas flares from new oilfields
- » No destruction of communities or ocean environments
- » No socioeconomic ills related to oilfield activities
- » Ending corrupt oil block allocations
- » Ending Illegal bunkering and other forms of oil theft
- » Safe and clean environment
- » Reduction and ultimately elimination of violent conflicts in the oilfields.

The proposal holds that the best way forward for Africa is to halt new oil-field development and to leave the oil underground. This is because Africa cannot afford to remain in the trap of supplying raw materials at externally determined prices and with the environmental costs left unattended.

Decades of oil extraction in Nigeria have translated into billions of dollars that have brought nothing but misery to the masses. The country serves as a model to be avoided and it is time for Africa to step back and review the situation into which she has been plunged. The preservation of the environment, restoration of polluted streams and lands and recovery of the peoples' dignity will only be achieved when citizens resist the pull of the barrel of crude and understand that the soil is more important to our people than oil and its spoils.

Africa's voices are calling for change

The debates on and steps to tackle global warming must shift to confronting the root causes of the crises. This demands a deep reappraisal of the socio-economic relations that have given birth to these crises. It is necessary for humanity to rediscover that it is part of a cosmos and cannot be bigger than the whole. The current mode of production, driven by fossil fuels and other extractive activities, cannot be sustained. Corporate interests are driving our finite planet towards a cataclysm. When and why did humanity surrender its right to live sensibly and accept instead the corporate creed of greed? What can be done to restore some semblance of balance?

With so much disenchantment with government and transnational corporations, the people must forge alliances among themselves and with their communities. Solidarity must be rebuilt and people's sovereignty reclaimed in all spheres of endeavour. African governments are unwilling or unable to regulate the extractive industries. Instead, these industries hide behind instruments of state repression and enjoy impunity. Communities are criminalised when they protest against despoliation.

The answer lies in linking communities and peoples, sharing ideas through creative means of communication, learning from events and from history, and being prepared to confront the wielders of power. That is the way to reclaim our heavily polluted and overrun community environments. We must also set up community schools on sustainability and environmental justice. Experiences must be documented and knowledge and wisdom shared. We must get involved in political processes and insist that leaders are chosen through the ballot and not by the bullet.

From Dakar to Mogadishu and from Cape Town to Cairo, the peoples of the continent are slowly but surely recovering their voices. Do not mistake the stamping, singing and jumping for a dance party. These actions are the generators that power the dynamos and carve out the path of resistance and change.

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