


Green Awareness Grows in Oily Niger Delta

By Nico Colombant
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Environmental awareness is growing in Nigeria's oil-rich Niger Delta, as well as anger over spills and drastic changes to the region's ecosystem. VOA's Nico Colombant reports from the towns of Ikarama and Odi in the Niger Delta.



Abila Idoukumo walks in tall grass just a few meters away from the Ikarama community in Bayelsa State, onto a knee-deep oily swamp the size of several football fields.

"Since January, the crude was spilled here and it has not been cleaned until this present date. It has not been awarded to any contractor," he said. "All the grasses, everything here has been damaged, fish that were still living within the water cycle are all dead and there is no way to utilize this place for our own farming system again."

Idoukumo stands in front of spill

Villagers say the oil seeped from underground pipelines operated by Dutch-based oil conglomerate Shell.

Shell officials in Nigeria refused to comment, saying they were too busy dealing with threats by militants who blow up oil installations and kidnap foreign workers.

Idoukumo, a plumber and father of seven, says children initially got skin infections, measles, and coughs, while adults got headaches.

"In the evening, you cannot get a very good breath of air," he said. "Children because of this have been getting sick from time to time and these are things we have been crying to find an avenue to be rescued from this problem. And so presently, you see with your eyes, that the community is always in hazard."

Lambert Miebi is trained as a chemical safety engineer, but he says the oil companies will not hire him, even though he believes he would be a better choice than outsiders who care little about local concerns.

"When I see this every day, I cry," he said.

He adds that Shell often blames oil spills on sabotage to steal oil, but he denies that took place here.



Nearby Shell pipelines blamed for spill



VOA photo - N. Colombari

"They will always see that it is a sabotage. But sometimes let us take a good analysis of what is going on if really this is a sabotage," he said. "This pipe has been here for so long and none of these things have been restructured. So if any spillage [occurs], they say it is sabotage, but it is not all sabotage. So this thing has become a nuisance to this community and even the entire Niger Delta. We are talking about toxic substances that have degraded this environment. And if you have talk about compensation about all these things, no it has not been given to us."

Ibiba Don Pedro is the author of a book called *Out of a Bleak Landscape*. It details violence and environmental degradation that coincided with oil production in the Niger Delta.

Bathing in foul waters

"They used to have large bodies of fresh water," she said.

Don Pedro accuses oil companies of causing other problems that are less apparent, but sometimes even more troublesome in a context of poverty.



VOA photo - N. Colombari

"In the course of bringing in equipment and all that, they had to do dredging projects, they dredged into areas that used to be fresh water," he said. "Today, those areas have been inundated by salt water so the people that had depended on the fresh water sources in those areas, you can imagine how bad it is. You have to travel in canoes, you see canoes in the Niger Delta, with women, men and children, carrying plastic drums and so on, you know how slow the canoes are, several-hundred kilometers away from their communities every day. That is how bad it is."

Villagers in canoes look for fresh water

Some activists are slowly trying to reverse the negative effects of living in an oil-rich but impoverished region.

On a patch of jungle land with chirping birds near the town of Odi, economist Gordon Abiama has a dream to build an eco-village.

Odi was razed by government forces in 1999 following the killing of a dozen policemen. It was also here that violent militants first rose against oil production in the 1960s, by blowing up an oil pipeline.

Abiama says he prefers constructive methods that empower people.

"The purpose of an eco-village is to encourage people to live a life in terms of sustainable lifestyle, not ostentatious lifestyle like is lived in developed countries, and that we are now trying to imitate," he said. "They are trying to come back to us, to have a sort of community life where you know your next neighbor. That life, that typical African tradition we want to keep it, but while embracing modern technology, we do not want to draw away from our deep well of traditional creativity, we want to fuse it together."

Abiama demonstrates how he has been making bricks to build houses in the eco-village he wants to build.



VOA photo - N. Colombari

"This brick is made of cement, just about 10 percent cement, water and then this red soil and it is manually produced using a brick machine and with this we could build an ecological eco-house so to speak, to make the room very, very cool. We are



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drawing this from our traditional house building system, but this is using modern techniques as well," he said.

Roof tiles are being made with cement and coconut fiber.

Funding for this project has dried up though, and two years into construction, little has been built, while Nigeria's oil production climbs, and ecologists say environmental problems in the Niger Delta worsen.

One brick at a time for Abiama's eco-village

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