NNIMMO BASSEY (Nigeria)

"…for revealing the full ecological and human horrors of oil production and for his inspired work to strengthen the environmental movement in Nigeria

Nnimmo Bassey's work as Executive Director of Environmental Rights Action in Nigeria and Chair of Friends of the Earth International has turned him into one of Africa's leading advocates and campaigners for the environment and human rights. Indefatigably, Bassey has stood up against the practices of multinational corporations in his country and the environmental devastation they leave behind destroying the lives and ignoring the rights of the local population.

Nnimmo Bassey was born on 11 June 1958. He qualified as an architect and practiced in the public sector for ten years. He became active on human rights issues in the 1980s as a member of the Board of Directors of Nigeria's Civil Liberties Organisation. In 1993, he co-founded Environmental Rights Action (ERA), a Nigerian advocacy NGO, to deal with environmental human rights issues in the country.

Environmental Rights Action / Friends of the Earth Nigeria

Environmental Rights Action is also known as Friends of the Earth Nigeria and is the national chapter of Friends of the Earth International (FOEI), the world's largest grassroots environmental network. In 2008, Bassey was elected Chair of Friends of the Earth International. The organisation, in coordination with its national chapters and under Bassey's leadership, currently (September 2010) has six major programme areas: climate justice and energy; food

sovereignty; economic justice; forests and biodiversity; resisting mining, oil and gas; and water.

Bassey and Environmental Rights Action's major campaigning focus is oil, and the enormous damage being caused to Nigerian communities and other countries in the region (Angola, Cameroon, Chad, Republic of the Congo, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, and Sudan), where oil is produced. He also works on supporting a broad movement across sub-tropical African countries where new finds of oil are being made.

Oil spills & gas flaring in the Niger Delta

It has been estimated that spills equivalent to the size of that from the Exxon Valdez have occurred in the Niger Delta every year over the past 50 years. Bassey says that there are at least 300 (major and minor) spills every year. The Nigerian Government has established that there were more than 3200 spills between 2006 and 2010. Many have not been cleared up; few lead to compensation payments. Life expectancy in the Niger Delta is 41 years, compared to 48 years nationally in Nigeria.

Shell claims that 98% of its spills are caused by theft, vandalism or sabotage by militants and that it is "committed to cleaning up any spill as fast as possible as soon as and for whatever reason it occurs". Environmental Rights Action and the local communities blame rusting pipes and other deteriorating infrastructure and say that often companies are slow to respond. Bassey is convinced that the costs of the oil production are far greater than its benefits so he demands to "leave the oil in the soil".

Environmental Rights Action has led lawsuits against oil companies on behalf of many communities in Nigeria for liability for damage to their people and environment.

Since 1996, Bassey and Environmental Rights Action have led Oilwatch Africa and since 2006 have led also the global South network, Oilwatch International, through which they seek to mobilize communities in Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon, Congo (Brazzaville), Ghana, and Uganda as well as South America and South East Asia to resist destructive oil and gas extraction activities.

In addition to its work on oil spills, Environmental Rights Action has campaigned against gas flaring, winning a landmark ruling by a Nigerian High Court in 2005 that gas flaring is unconstitutional, damages people and the environment, and must stop.

GMOs, biofuels and food sovereignty

The other major area of Environmental Rights Action's work is GMOs (genetically modified organisms), agrofuels and food sovereignty. Friends of the Earth organisations in Africa created a regional campaign in this area in 2004 and Bassey worked as an international campaigner on GMO issues from 2004-2008. In 2009, field-testing of genetically modified cassava was introduced in Nigeria, and Bassey now sees a big risk that African agriculture will be contaminated by GMOs.

Further activities & outreach

In Nigeria, Environmental Rights Action trains people on environmental monitoring and gives legal support to communities affected by environmental damage, with Bassey being directly involved in community monitoring as well as media training for Nigerian journalists. In addition, Environmental Rights Action under Bassey's oversight hosts the secretariat of the Africa Tobacco Control Regional Initiative and coordinates the Nigerian Tobacco Control Alliance.

In 1998, Environmental Rights Action won the Sophie Prize for its work on environmental justice, and in 2009 the Bloomberg Award for tobacco control activism. Bassey was named by TIME magazine as a 2009 Hero of the Environment. He is a writer of poetry as well as of campaigning and research documents. One of Bassey's books is entitled *Knee Deep in Crude* (2009).

Quote:
"We see frantic efforts being made to stop the spill in the US. But in Nigeria companies largely ignore their spills, cover them up and destroy people's livelihood and environments. The Gulf spill can be seen as a metaphor for what is happening daily in the oilfields of Nigeria and other parts of Africa."
(Nnimmo Bassey quoted in The Observer, UK, May 30, 2010)

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