

Factsheet

The UNEP pollution research project in Ogoniland and its political importance



In 2010, after long years of talks and negotiations, the UNEP (United Nations Environment Programme) started a study to get a clear image of oil pollution in Ogoniland, a region where oil production has been on hold for over 18 years now. The Ogoni people forced Shell out of their region after years of protests against pollution and the lack of social development. Ever since, Shell and the Nigerian authorities have been looking for a way to appease the region that is so important for oil production and oil transit, and therefore also for the cash flow to Shell and the Nigerian State.

What is Ogoniland?

Ogoniland is located in the Niger Delta in southern Nigeria. Ogoniland sits between Port Harcourt, the oil capital of Nigeria and home to Shell Nigeria, and Bonny Island, where the main oil-export terminals are located. Main oil export pipelines such as the trans-Niger pipeline run through Ogoniland. Most Ogoni settlements are near the main river that connects Port Harcourt to the Atlantic Ocean or along other tidal creeks.

The Ogoni, like most Niger Delta inhabitants, are farmers and fishermen. Traditionally, the Niger Delta was a fertile region, important for food production. The Ogoni were a thriving ethnic nationality. As the Ogoni live relatively close to a large city and major oil installations, they have been very much aware of what has been going on since oil was discovered.

Shell in Ogoniland

Ogoniland is an important region for Shell as its main Nigerian export pipelines and major onshore oil fields are located in Ogoniland. Shell had to leave Ogoniland in 1993 and has not produced oil there since. In early 2011 the Nigerian National Petroleum Company (NNPC) announced it planned to restart oil production in Ogoniland on behalf of the Shell joint venture. The Ogoni however made clear that the NNPC is not welcome either.

A very short history of Ogoniland

Ogoniland is part of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, which was established by the British and became independent after the Second World War. Many different ethnic groups and religions were brought together in one large country. Soon after Nigeria's independence, oil production took off. Ethnic groups in the south of the country felt discriminated against by more populous ethnic

groups and decided to leave the Federation. Their new country was called Biafra. This however turned out to be a dramatic mistake, as the Nigerian government and army fought hard to regain control of Biafra and its oil.

Since the war, oil companies and the State have been perceived as being hand in glove: a colonial power profiting from the oil in the Delta Region without bringing benefits to the region. The Ogoni turned out to be the most organised ethnic group and, inspired by poet Ken Saro Wiwa, organised mass demonstrations against Shell, forcing the oil company out. A few years later, on 10 November 1995, Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight of his colleagues were hanged by the Nigerian military government.

Scepticism and resentment

While the Ogoni were successful in stopping oil production, the oil pollution remained. Over the years many promises were made and studies were done in Ogoniland and elsewhere. Effective clean-up of older spills, however, never took place. It is quite clear to local people where the pollution is and they do not see why research is necessary. There is a lot of scepticism regarding the willingness of the state and federal governments and the oil companies to spend money on cleaning up the Delta. Corruption and a lack of independent institutions make it difficult to embark on a successful clean-up project including monitoring studies.

The UNEP project

As the anger in the Delta grew and government and oil companies became convinced that action should be taken to prevent a real uprising, they turned to the UNEP, an independent, outside institution. It took over a year before the state and federal governments agreed on the project

plan, but the project was started in 2010. The aim was to map all polluted sites in Ogoniland so that a plan for clean-up could be constructed. The map was to be published after a year, in early 2011. The UNEP worked with foreign experts and trained local sample-takers and liaison officers. Samples were analysed in foreign laboratories.

The project was paid for by Shell and as a UN institution, the UNEP reports to the Nigerian Government. The project went well and the final report was to be published in February or March 2011. But then the publication was postponed until after the elections.

Mike Cowing's statement

June 2010: Mike Cowing, the project manager of the UNEP pollution study, appeared on the Dutch TV documentary (Zembla) and was very critical of Shell's behaviour in Nigeria. He explained that Shell did not clean up pollution from an oil spill in Goi according to international standards.

August 2010: An article was circulated in the press stating that at a UNEP press conference Mike Cowing said that 90% of oil spills in Ogoniland are caused by gangs that steal oil from pipelines, a practice called illegal bunkering. NGOs – amongst which Milieudefensie [Friends of the Earth Netherlands] and FoEI – reacted with utter amazement. They pointed out the fact that the UNEP was not investigating the causes of pollution, that the UNEP project was far from finished and that Mr Cowing must have been making statements on the basis of hearsay. Which spills and which period Mr Cowing was speaking about never became clear.

23 August 2010: UNEP issued a press release officially renouncing the statements of Mr Cowing. Soon after, Mike Cowing was replaced as project manager but remained in Nigeria working on the project.

Next step: Clean-up and prevention

Now that the study is finished, clean-up should start as soon as possible. Too much time has been lost in which many Ogoni have been unable to fish or farm, unable to generate any income and often even unable to drink their local water. According to Nigerian law, the oil companies are responsible for clean-up irrespective of the cause of an oil spill.

The Niger Delta is currently in a difficult situation. As fishing and farming are problematic and there is a lot of anger towards oil companies, bunkering and attacks on oil installations continue, causing more oil pollution. Clean-up and development are therefore essential for the prevention of new spills, in addition to proper maintenance monitoring of pipelines, carrying out integrity checks and guarding of pipelines.

What remains: 80% of the Niger Delta

Ogoniland is an important and heavily polluted part of the Delta Region. However, it is a small part of the Delta and an unknown amount of oil lies elsewhere in the Delta. International oil companies should ensure that the whole Delta is cleaned up and that no new spills occur.

Responsibility of the Dutch and British Governments

Britain and the Netherlands as home countries of Royal Dutch Shell have responsibilities to support and motivate the Nigerian Government in dealing with oil pollution and oil companies. This is also the case with France for Total, Italy for ENI and the USA for Exxon. Useful expertise concerning pollution control and the regulation of oil companies is available in all these home countries.

More information:

UNEP Press Release

www.unep.org/cpi/briefs/2010Aug24.doc

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