



## The own worst enemy theory: A case study of oil pollution in Nigeria

*"Oil companies have been exploiting Nigeria's weak regulatory system for too long," "They do not adequately prevent environmental damage and they frequently fail to properly address the devastating impact that their bad practice has on people's lives."*

**Audrey Gaughran**  
Amnesty International.

*"A landmark United Nations study into the long-term environmental impact of oil production in Nigeria says that oil spills have led to acute health risks for area residents and widespread environmental damage that may take as many as 30 years and \$1 billion to clean up"*

**Alex Flynn and Will Connors**  
The Wall Street Journal, Aug. 2: 2011.

### The theory of Blackman as his own worst enemy

On a business visit with colleagues to Moscow, at the invitation of the Russia government during the early days of "perestroika", a Russian colleague said to me, "you Nigerians are learned. In every major world conference I have attended, Nigerian nationals have been present. With all the knowledge you and your fellow citizens possess in abundance, why can't you help yourselves and your country?" Few years later, a Jewish landlord of mine left me with words of wisdom – "no people or race can make it on the world stage without an uncompromising value, unity of purpose, love and loyalty for self and generations to come". Without him saying it, I knew instantly that the old man had figured out that the Blackman is his own worst enemy – lack of deep rooted value, love and loyalty for his kind and natural endowments. The purpose of this article is to explore this hypothesis of Blackman – his own worst enemy, using the blessing/curse of oil exploration in Nigeria as a test case. At your own time you can extend this test to present day lifestyle, food consumption, dress code, music, Nollywood, governance, judiciary, infrastructures, etc., in Africa. Who knows, you might reach a different conclusion. Either way, it is my hope that lessons can be learnt in the interest of future generations.

Some might brand me a traitor for this article. My questions to such people are (1) in which part of the world are you today, why are you there and in your current situation? (2) What is your assessment of the economic and political realities of your country of birth? (3) How many countries governed by your kind are role models for others? (4) If you live abroad, e.g. in USA or EU, which passport are you and your family holding and treasure and how soon do you plan moving back to your country of birth and why? Until we start telling ourselves the truth as it is, we will continue to remain in the dark. The policy of don't ask and don't tell has not taken us anywhere. Openmind Foundation is about re-programming our mind-set for a greater tomorrow. There are great minds within our communities. Let's put them into use at full throttle before too late – hence this article.

### Petroleum and natural gas business in Nigeria

Oil exploration has been on-going in Nigeria for over 50 years and Shell has been active in Nigeria since 1937. Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) is the largest oil and gas exploration company in Nigeria, from land and swamps in the Niger Delta and from deep-water reserves some 120 kilometres off the coast. The company operates the oil and gas joint venture between the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation – NNPC (55%), SPDC (30%), Total's subsidiary (10%), and Nigerian Agip Oil (5%). The company is also involved in gas sales and distribution.

The company's operation involves a network of over 6,000 kilometres of flow lines and pipelines, 86 oilfields, 1,000 producing wells, 68 flow stations, 10 gas plants and two major oil export terminals at Bonny and Farcados (Shell , April 2011). The Bonny crude oil terminal is the largest of its kind in Africa and the associated gas plant has the capacity to produce 20 million standard cubic feet of gas per day ([www.shell.com.ng](http://www.shell.com.ng)).

Between 2006-2010 the joint venture operated by SPDC generated total revenue of about \$31 billion to the Nigerian government – an average of \$6.2 billion per annum. “In addition to generating revenue, Shell companies in Nigeria actively promote projects in the Niger Delta that support small businesses, agriculture, training, education, health care and capacity building” (Shell). All these statistics / blessings have come at a huge cost to the people of Nigeria and Delta indigenes in particular – pollution.

### The human and environmental cost of oil exploration

The SPDC website states Shell's operations' core values as “honesty, integrity and respect for people” ([www.shell.com.ng](http://www.shell.com.ng)). Whether these stated core values cover environmental and local livelihood protection is best left for Shell, mission statement gurus and legal minds to interpret. However actions, evidence and records speak louder than mission statements. Even where, for the benefit of a doubt, and on the basis of Shell's operating standards in Europe and America, we were to accept that environmental protection is part of its core values, a question then arises as to what accounts for the Nigerian Delta experience (ecological catastrophe). Could it be a product of double standards by Shell, a situation fuelled by Blackman's inhumanity to his very self (the value/love/loyalty factors) or both?

## The Gulf of Mexico Oil Disaster (USA)

European and Americans provide an enduring example of a race, government and people that place premium on value, love, and loyalty for self and on the strategy of creating and sustaining global dominance for generations to come. This is ever evident in their approach to addressing challenges and disasters. For example, on 20 April 2010, an offshore drilling rig, Deepwater Horizon, exploded after a blowout and sank two days later, killing 11 people. The blowout in the Macondo Prospect field in the Gulf of Mexico resulted in a partially capped oil well one mile below the surface of the water. Within a short space of time more than "43,000 suggestions on how to tackle the Gulf oil spill" had been advanced by experts and concerned citizens of the United States and Europe (Suzanne Goldenberg, Guardian, 2011). The President of the United States of America, Barack Obama, took up the case of the people of Gulf of Mexico, the environment, the fisheries industry in the locality and the government he heads. In one of his numerous statements on the incident he said:

*"I say we can't afford not to change how we produce and use energy - because the long-term costs to our economy, our national security, and our environment are far greater" .. "We will make BP pay for the damage their company has caused," (Obama, June 2010).*

The President backed his words with action by bullying BP "into depositing £13.5 billion (\$20 billion) into a fund to settle compensation claims for the calamitous Gulf of Mexico oil spill" (David Gardner, MailOnline, 2010). Mr Obama also said that "a \$120m fund would also be set up to compensate oil industry workers (BBC, June 2010). On 5 July, less than three 3 months after the Gulf of Mexico disaster, BP reported that its own expenditures on the oil spill had reached \$3.12 billion, including the cost of the spill response, containment, relief well drilling, grants to the Gulf States, claims paid, and federal costs. (blog.inpageads.com).

The US politicians spoke of legal action and even the possibility of criminal charges against BP. By 17 June, over 220 lawsuits were filed against BP alone. Lawsuits were also filed against Transocean, Cameron International Corporation, and Halliburton Energy Services. It did not end there. The BP chief executive, Tony Hayward, appeared before a US Congress committee on Thursday 17 June. Contrast this with the Niger Delta experience – the actions of the Nigerian people, the government, the security service agents, and Shell.

## The Niger Delta Oil Disaster (Nigeria)

With a large number of oilfields, "the Niger delta supplies 40% of all the crude the United States imports and is the world capital of oil pollution. Life expectancy in its rural communities, half of which have no access to clean water, has fallen to little more than 40 years over the past two generations. Locals blame the oil that pollutes their land and can scarcely believe the contrast with the steps taken by BP and the US government to try to stop the Gulf oil leak and to protect the Louisiana shoreline from pollution". (John Vidal, Observer, 2010).

As a matter of fact, more oil spill from the delta's network of terminals, pipes, pumping stations and oil platforms takes place every year than was lost in the Gulf of Mexico (*ibid*). There were more than 7,000 spills between 1970 and 2000, and there are 2,000 official major spillages sites, many going back decades, with thousands of smaller ones still waiting to be cleared up. More than 1,000 spill cases have

been filed against Shell alone (Nigerian Federal Government Statistics). The government's national oil spill detection and response agency (NOSDRA) reports that between 1976 and 1996 alone, more than 2.4m barrels contaminated the environment. On this issue Mr Ben Amunwa, of the London-based oil watch group Platform, was quoted as saying:

*"Deepwater Horizon may have exceed Exxon Valdez, but within a few years in Nigeria offshore spills from four locations dwarfed the scale of the Exxon Valdez disaster many times over. Estimates put spill volumes in the Niger delta among the worst on the planet, but they do not include the crude oil from waste water and gas flares. Companies such as Shell continue to avoid independent monitoring and keep key data secret."*

According to NOSDRA:

*"Oil spills and the dumping of oil into waterways has been extensive, often poisoning drinking water and destroying vegetation. These incidents have become common due to the lack of laws and enforcement measures within the existing political regime,"*

A recent UN investigation reports that "oil companies and the Nigerian government had not just failed to meet their own standards, but that the process of investigation, reporting and clean-up was deeply flawed in favour of the firms and against the victims. Spills in the US are responded to in minutes; in the Niger delta, which suffers more pollution each year than the Gulf of Mexico, it can take companies weeks or more" (John Vidal, Observer, 2011).

#### Major Causes of the Niger Delta Pollution

Shell argues that 98% of environmental oil pollution in Niger Delta originates from vandalism, theft or sabotage by militants and only a minimal amount by deteriorating infrastructure. "Sometimes communities do not give us access to clean up the pollution because they can make more money from compensation," said a spokesman.

The counter argument is that Niger Delta is "faced with incessant oil spills from rusty pipes, some of which are 40 years old," (Bonny Otavie, a Bayelsa MP). The general view is that Shell's vast network of rusting pipes and storage tanks, gas flaring, corroding pipelines, semi-derelict pumping stations and old wellheads, as well as tankers and vessels cleaning out tanks are responsible for the oil pollution.

Bunkering and oil theft are equally a source of oil pollution. "The consensus on the Delta is that bunkering and oil theft on a grand scale are condoned, protected and encouraged by a web of organised crime which colludes with government and political elites, the security services and people within the oil companies" ((John Vidal, Observer, 2010). Organised crime now dominates the theft of Ogoniland oil, says Patrick Naagbantou, co-ordinator of the Amnesty International-backed Centre for Environment, Human Rights and Development. "The pollution has led to the proliferation of small arms, making the delta now one of the most dangerous places on earth. The arms come through porous borders. You can get AK-47s, Chinese, South African, Italian, German and Belgian arms."

"There is no way so much oil could be stolen without protection. Communities get the blame for the spills and the thefts, but the top people are taking far more and are well aware of what is going on. The navy patrols the creeks and main rivers, so there is no way boats they could get past checkpoints

without their knowledge," (Kentebbe Ebiaridor, a field officer with the Port Harcourt-based Environment Rights Action group). The latest UN Environment Programme report states:

*"The fact that these operations are proliferating in full view of the enforcement agencies is indicative, at best of a lack of preventative measures and, at worst, of collusion,"*

"Reports allege that top naval officers have private pipelines that serve as conduits through which they siphon crude oil, load on to vessels and ship to refineries in other countries such as South Africa. Last year, a Shell man was reportedly sacked after it was found he had set up a gang to destroy well-heads and then get his contacts to clean up the pollution. In 2003, the Nigerian tanker, African Pride, was impounded after being found carrying 11,000 barrels of stolen oil and was held in custody by the Nigerian navy. Within months it had mysteriously escaped" (John Vidal, Observer, 2011). Note that these are Nigerian security officers who swore an oath to protect the people, assets, unity and national integrity of Nigeria.

"On Wednesday, Shell formally accepted responsibility in British law for two significant spills in nearby Bodo. Those were rare victories. More than 1,000 court cases have been taken against Shell for pollution in the last 30 years, but almost all are rejected, settled for a few dollars or remain mired in the legal system for years. Even when the courts rule against the company and fine it millions, it is possible for it to appeal, with legal delays draining communities of cash. One case against Shell taken by people in Goi is still in the courts after 14 years" (*ibid*).

Three questions for you – why was this current case against Shell taken to a British Law Court when the crime actually took place in the sovereign state of the Federal Republic of Nigeria? How much compensation will this law suit attract, if at all, compared to the Gulf of Mexico Oil Disaster? Would the Niger Delta experience ever take place in the land of the government and people of the Caucasian race? I leave these thought provoking issues with you to think through and to write your own conclusion for this article. Our future is in our hands, not in the hands of multinationals and their European and American shareholders and governments. How safe is that future in our hands? That's the trillion dollar question.

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