News
EarthBeat
Two fishermen in Bodo, Nigeria arrive home with no catch after oil spills have affected aquati

Two fishermen in Bodo, Nigeria arrive home with no catch. Oil spills have affected aquatic life in local communities. (Patrick Egwu)



by Patrick Egwu

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Port Harcourt, NIGERIA — On a sweltering afternoon in October, a group of farmers arrived by boat to Bodo, a fishing and farming community in Nigeria's oil-producing region of the Niger Delta. The area, previously known for its mangroves and lush green vegetation, has been affected for years by frequent oil spills.

"Oil is a curse for our community, and we have been less prosperous because of it," said John Pigi, a local fisherman and parishioner at St. Paul's Catholic Church. "The government and the companies just make profits from our sufferings."

For decades, settlements in the region have been contaminated by oil from the operations of multinational oil companies. Farmlands, water sources and the livelihoods of locals have been affected, even destroyed, with little or no compensation. In Bodo, Shell has been one of the biggest polluters.

Pigi's community has previously won a historic legal case against Shell at a UK court after a major oil spill in 2008 where more than 560,000 barrels of oil spilled into the

community. The company paid out £55 million in compensation in 2014. Now they're suing Shell again over the oil giant's planned divestment — a process where international oil companies sell off their assets — from the region.

Bodo is a town in Ogoniland, an area that spans nearly 400 square miles with more than 800,000 inhabitants, per Nigeria's latest population census. The Niger Delta region is the third largest mangrove ecosystem in the world and hosts some of the major international oil companies, according to the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP).

UK-based Royal Dutch Shell and Italian oil giant Eni are the two major oil companies operating in the region through their subsidiaries: the Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria Limited and the Nigerian Agip Oil Company.

Last August, Eni completed a $783 million divestment deal to sell its assets to Oando PLC, a local energy company in Nigeria, despite resistance from locals who want the oil company to clean up contaminated sites before divesting.

In January 2024, Shell announced it had reached an agreement with a consortium of five Nigerian-based companies to divest its onshore operations from the region. The $2.4 billion Shell deal recently received approval from the Nigerian government, though an exit timeline remains unclear.

A local farmer affected by oil spills stands in the middle of her farmland.

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Shell's divestment follows growing pressure from locals and environmental activists for the environmental damage caused by its operations since oil exploration started in the region in 1956. The company said it aims to reduce its carbon footprints in the region and will remain a major investor in Nigeria's energy sector through its deepwater projects and gas businesses.

Pigi, alongside local environmental activists and civil society groups, including Amnesty International, has been protesting against the deal and mounting pressure on Shell to stop the proposed divestment plans.

"They can't leave without fixing the mess they have caused in our community," said Pigi, who accused the companies of trying to evade their responsibilities. "Farmers and fishermen here have lost everything they have because of oil spills."

In September 2024, more than 1,200 residents from oil communities, including Pigi's, filed a $323 million lawsuit against Shell to halt their planned exit from the region. Pigi told NCR that the court judgment will help address the environmental injustices they faced as a result of the operations of the multinationals and that it's an important move to "hold them accountable."

According to a 2011 report by the United Nations Environment Programme, the cost of cleaning up the oil spills was estimated at $1 billion. Shell was to provide $900 million to a trust fund, while the Nigerian government and other operators in the area are responsible for contributing $100 million.

Last year, an independent report by the Bayelsa State Oil and Environment Commission indicted multinationals like Shell, TotalEnergies and ExxonMobil for oil spills amounting to 110,000 barrels over the last 50 years in Nigeria. Forensic analysis of soil and water samples in communities over a two-year period revealed an alarming level of toxic chemicals. Results from the blood and tissue samples from 1,600 people found elevated levels of heavy metals, including lead, nickel and cadmium.

"Shell cannot be allowed to divest from the onshore oil industry in the Niger Delta before it takes responsibility for its toxic legacy of pollution and the safe decommissioning of abandoned oil infrastructure," said Audrey Gaughran, executive director of Amsterdam-based Center for Research on Multinationals, a knowledge and research nonprofit which investigates the operations of multinational oil companies.

Gaughran said the UK oil giant is leaving behind oil-contaminated rivers and streams and large areas of polluted land that have devastated the lives and livelihoods of millions living in the region.

In February 2024, Gaughran's organization released a report showing how historical pollution remained a serious issue and how Shell was using divestment as a way to evade responsibility.

"The certification process Shell uses to claim it has cleaned up oil spill sites is deeply flawed and cannot be relied upon," Gaughran said.

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Baue Great, a Catholic seminarian in Port Harcourt, a city in Nigeria's oil-rich region, said multinational oil companies should be held accountable for spills in local communities. (Patrick Egwu)

In April, We the People, a local advocacy nonprofit working to hold multinationals in the region accountable, started a petition to stop the divestment plans. The petition calls on the Nigerian government, federal lawmakers and other stakeholders to halt all "divestment moves of international oil companies pending an assessment of the health, ecological, and livelihood impacts of hydrocarbon extraction in the Niger Delta."

The petition said international oil companies have turned the region into one of the "most polluted places on earth, and its people, among the poorest and most poisoned."

As of mid-February 2024, the petition had received more than 3,000 signatures.

"We cannot let these companies simply abandon the communities they have occupied for decades. They return to their home countries with hundreds of billions of dollars in profit and leave the Niger Delta with the worst ecological disaster known to man," the petition read.

A Shell representative said via email that as part of the divestment agreements, the company will continue to carry out remediation works where oil spills have occurred.

After a Sunday Mass in October last year at St. John's Catholic Church, Baue Great, a resident of Bodo and a seminarian of the Catholic Diocese of Port Harcourt, chatted with some parishioners who approached him in front of the chapel. He told NCR he supports any legal action to hold multinational oil companies accountable.

"The people are suffering because of oil spills, and the contaminated farmlands cannot be used for planting in the next 50 years to come," he said. "If you're working in a community as a company, you should be able to do something good for the people, like good healthcare, clean water and electricity, but these amenities are non-existent."

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Great told NCR that his theology on the environment was inspired by Pope Francis' 2015 social encyclical on the environment and human ecology, "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home."

"God will forgive us and forget. Humans may forgive us and not forget, but nature will never forgive and forget," he said. "This is my home, and everything that affects them also affects me."

Great said he uses his social media platforms to call attention to the activities of the oil companies in his community, including authoring articles about the environment in local publications, noting that religious leaders should continue to "write and preach about this injustice."

Bonny Rex Oboh, Laudato Si' Movement Nigeria national coordinator, said they have plans to work with grassroots groups and activists to mount pressure on multinationals like Shell for how their activities impact communities and contribute to global warming.

The Laudato Si' Movement is a global network of 900 Catholic organizations and thousands of grassroots leaders working to achieve climate and ecological justice.

"We are adding our voice to see how the government can look into that direction and end fossil fuel production by multinationals," said Oboh, who has been pushing for the government to sign a treaty to end fossil fuel use. "Shell wants to leave without cleaning their mess. We care for the earth. We can't keep quiet because whenever any climate disaster happens, it will affect everyone irrespective of religion or beliefs."

As the communities await a judgment from the courts, which could take several months or years, Pigi says he is hopeful they will rule in their favor.

"We want them [oil companies] to do the right thing and not abandon their responsibilities," he said. "We will continue fighting until the right things are done."