



Ayibakuro Warder at the Niger Delta.

Delivering the Delta from the Spills of Shell

by Ayibakuro Warder

As a child near the delta, I remember that my parents used to gather greater harvests from their farming and fishing activities. The sizes of cassava and plantain were incomparable to the present yields. Our fish ponds, lakes and creeks have likewise suffered from incessant oil spills. The people are one in their opinion that the smaller and fewer harvest could only be attributed to

I am Ayibakuro Warder, a mother of five children. I am a native of Ikarama, an Ijaw community within the Okordia clan, in the Yenagoa Local Government of Bayelsa State here in the Niger Delta region. While I am employed in the local government, I remain engaged in fishing and farming to support my family. But much of my time is devoted as a leader of Ikarama's women as well the whole Okordia clan. There were times when I sat with the chiefs of the clan to settle land disputes which sometimes included the oil companies, whose activities we, women have consistently opposed.

pollution coming from the oil extraction activities near the delta.

The sad part is once our natural resources such as bodies of water are affected by the oil spill, we can no longer derive any benefits from them. Yet these waters and surrounding valleys are the very sources of our livelihood. Whenever oil spills happen, not only are the

natural resources damaged sometimes beyond repair but our survival is also undermined.

Worse, health problems especially among our children arise. With our sources of income gone, we are left confused as to where to seek medical help. Several women also died as a result of oil spills. Cilia Neberi easily comes to mind. Only in her 30s, she tried to withdraw her family from the affected areas of the 2006 oil spill but she succumbed in just two months, leaving her husband and three children.

Because of the damage wrought by oil companies to our environment, most girls

Shell has never found it fair to compensate its victims. Instead, it deploys its military personnel to intimidate the community from airing their grievances.

have become disinterested in traditional farming and fishing. Unscrupulous men have taken advantage of the girls' sorry situation, luring them into the family way but dumping them later.

In 2007, an oil spill took place, coming from the Okordia manifold. The women of Ikarama lost all the cassava that they soaked in the creek. This has been our tradition in hastening the fermentation process of the cassava as we prepare *foofoo*, cassava dough, our staple. The oil spill likewise destroyed the traps that we set for fishing. I then led a women's protest in front of Shell's office at the Kolocreek Logistic Base.

But regardless of the cause of the oil spill, whether because of sabotage or equipment failure, Shell has never found it fair to compensate its victims. Instead, it deploys its military personnel to intimidate the

community from airing their grievances.

In the end, we find ourselves mired in poverty and our hopes dashed. In the 2007 protest, Shell merely asked us to leave their office and drink their crude oil.

Shell's shabby treatment of us is only indicative of how much regard is given to women in the community. For even in community meetings where major decisions are taken, women's views hardly hold water.

Moreover the divide and rule tactics of the multinationals have contributed to mistrust and disunity among the families in the community. Families that used to do things in common are now at each other's jugulars, with landed families immediately grabbing whatever comes from Shell. I myself have become subjected to these rifts. I am no longer in good terms with my husband's family. This is very sad, I must say.

The situation is not limited to our community alone. Neighbouring communities suffer the same disunity, sometimes leading to violent clashes that result to deaths and the destruction of property. A recent case is the skirmish between the Ayemabele/Kalaba and Akumoni communities in December 2008. Two youths lost their lives and several houses were burned. At the centre of the conflict was Agip oil company and the military.

Sometimes I feel that only God can deliver us from our present problems since the government seems to have abandoned us to our fate. The government has failed to protect us from an environmental patriarchy and racism that are exercised by oil companies in our own land. If only it has lived up to its responsibilities, holding oil companies accountable and ensuring the viability of our environment, things would have been better for us.

But our struggle must go on. ■