



Emem Okon: “In Nigeria, there must be no divestment without ecosystem restoration”

Interview with Emem Okon, conducted by Capire.

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In Nigeria, the Niger Delta region has been at the center of international exploration of natural resources for more than two hundred years, since the British colonization to modern transnational corporations. In the region, which is highly populated, people are suffering the impact of oil and gas extraction that has been going on over the past six decades. Oil and gas extraction has devastated the environment, polluted the waters and the air, mainly through oil spillages and gas flaring. “Gas flaring is one of the consequences of oil extraction. It emits toxic gases into the atmosphere that comes out in huge flames of fire. The gas flare points are scattered all over the Niger Delta region”, explained to Capire the activist Emem Okon.

Emem works with the [Kebetkache Women Development & Resource Centre](#), a women’s rights organization from Nigeria. “We work mainly with grassroots women,



particularly women in oil-impacted communities in the Niger Delta.” During this interview, Emem spoke about the impacts of these companies on local communities, and how women have been organizing their work to guarantee restoration from the damage caused by their activities. This interview was conducted during the Rising Majority Congress, in Saint Louis, United States, in June 2024, which brought together 700 members of several grassroots organizations, parties, unions, and human rights movements in the country. Emem was part of the delegation of international observers who attended the congress invited by the Grassroots Global Justice Alliance (GGJ).

Can you tell us how the people from the Niger River Delta live? What are the impacts of this long period of oil and gas extraction in the region?

The gas flares affect the walls, it corrodes the roofs. Community members need to be changing their roofs as they have the capacity. But in most instances, you have people living in leaking buildings. It also causes acid rain. It is not safe to drink rainwater. Growing up, I can remember those days: we used to harvest rainwater in the absence of having potable water. Almost everybody gets water from bottles, or from streams, rivers, and the creeks. What is happening now is that because of rusted pipelines, oil is spilled from them and seeps into the waters, rivers and creeks. Most of the oil installations or activities are going on in riverine communities, so oil spills into the river.

There are also instances where the corporations have to open artificial canals to link their oil facility to their own platform or drilling site. Through these activities, the rivers are polluted. If you are traveling by boat, you can actually see oil shale on top of the rivers. The rivers are no longer safe. And these are places where women soak cassava to produce starch. You can imagine that soaking this cassava into a stream or river that is affected by oil is inviting the oil to be part of the food that you are processing. Sometimes the oil blows out. When this happens, it affects a large expanse of land. There are portions of farmlands in the Niger Delta that have been rendered unproductive for many decades.

Are there specific impacts on women? How does Kebetkache work with the affected women?

All these impacts are much higher on women, particularly community women. Not that it's not affecting the men, but you realize that the men have a way of interacting with the corporations, and they make gains from it. They are contractors, some of them become security surveillance, some of them are community leaders. They get



one or two benefits from the companies. But women, traditionally, are not included in decision-making processes. They are not even part of the consultation. These are some of the problems that necessitated Kebetkache being formed 21 years ago, and creating that platform, mobilizing these women to also have a say by speaking up on how they are being impacted.

Many of the women are poor. When a community woman is displaced from farming or fishing, she practically has no source of livelihood. In those communities, what other livelihood sources are left? It's like watching your community or your life in a movie: being controlled by forces, groups, or personalities that are too powerful for you to question or resist. So Kebetkache comes in with enlightenment on women's rights, empowering the women to speak up, and creating the confidence in women that they have the right to intervene in the activities that are going on in their own communities.

We've done this through a series of interventions, training the women on the existing petroleum laws. In 2021, the federal government, through the National Assembly, passed the Petroleum Industry Act, which gives too much power to the corporations over the community.

We are also mobilizing women on climate change issues. We carry out the Niger Delta Women's Day of Action for Environmental Justice, every year on December 17. We are also part of the organizers of the African Women's Climate Assembly, where opportunities are created for women in the communities that are directly impacted by climate change manifestations. This creates a linkage between local activism and what civil society organizations are doing at the national and international levels.

Which companies are exploiting the resources of the Niger Delta now? How do they relate to the Nigerian government?

The major oil corporations in Nigeria include Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria. This is the most popular, influential, and, maybe I should add, the most wicked, because most of the reports of destruction show Shell operating there. But we also have Chevron and ExxonMobil, which are U.S. corporations, and then we have Total Energy, from France, and Eni, from Italy. These companies and the federal government operate a joint venture business in Nigeria. The federal government owns 60% and the corporations own 40% of the business, which goes a long way to explain why the federal government is not taking actions in the interest of the people.

Companies operating in the fields do not discuss or consult with the people. They see the federal government as the owners of the land, so if you get licensed and go ahead



from the federal government, they don't see the need of discussing and engaging with the local community. The corporations are very much aware that there are international best practices that they should observe or consider when they are operating in local communities, but that is totally ignored.

What is the role of the international struggle for justice in giving visibility to what happens in Nigeria?

Working at the local level limits the level of influence that a civil society organization will have on a company like Chevron or Shell. We need that international solidarity to amplify the voices of the people working locally. We can leverage on organizations outside Nigeria that have connections and influence to amplify the voices and the activities of the local organizations. Because there are American companies, it is important to build solidarity with social movements in the U.S. And because of Shell, it is important to build solidarity with social movements in the Netherlands or in the United Kingdom.

“International solidarity is very critical. Besides, the federal government and the corporations would ignore the voices of local communities. But they are careful about the voices of people’s movement at the global level.”

With help from our allies in the U.S., we started an entire campaign about divesting from harm and investing in care. But, for us, this campaign has also to do with no divestment without ecosystem restoration. For example, the major oil corporations that I have mentioned are almost concluding the plan to divest from fossil fuel production. They are divesting from onshore production and want to move to offshore activities. The implication to us and the communities is that they are practically running away. They are selling off their assets onshore to smaller corporations and local oil companies. Civil society and the social and environmental justice movement are saying that they cannot leave without taking care of the damages that they've caused in communities.

The question is: who takes care of the liabilities? Is it Shell that is selling off assets, or is it the new company that is buying off Shell assets? Are they buying off both the assets and the problems? The federal government and the corporation have not responded to it. We demand for the ecosystem to be restored. We divest from destruction, divest from death because people are dying. A recent research we conducted shows we all have hydrocarbons in our blood. We are all vulnerable to cancer and other kinds of deadly diseases. So you divest from all those, and then you invest in health, you invest in education, you invest in restoration, you invest in environmental remediation. Those are the demands of the women.



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