Weaning and Healing from Fossil Addiction

Embracing Agroecology to Combat Hunger and Climate Change

Moving Forward with the Africa Climate Justice Collective

Biosafety in Nigeria: The Legislation, Regulations, Gaps and the Way Forward
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Mid-year greetings to you all.
This first half of 2024 has been characterised by many empowering activities.

There are indications that the remaining half will be nothing less; if anything, there are signs of even more momentous activities and events in the second half of 2024.

Guided by the ‘Culture of Life,’ which is our theme this year, we continue to escalate our advocacy on the urgent need to wean the world from fossil addiction and heal our communities from the pollution and devastation brought upon us by fossil extraction, which has been ongoing for almost seven decades in Nigeria. The report from one of our School of Ecology (SoE) sessions dedicated to this cause is shared with you here.

The burning issue of divestment, especially the recent announcement by Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPCD) to sell off the company to Renaissance, a consortium of five companies, is featured in this edition. If Shell’s divestment plan sails through, it would see the multinational leave the country without addressing the decades of destruction of farmlands and contaminated water bodies. It would mean gross abandonment of impoverished communities and failing livelihoods and public health wrecked by decades of inhuman extractive onslaught on communities by the oil companies.

Civil society organisations, including HOMEF and other concerned Nigerians, on Tuesday, 21 May 2024, protested the SPDC’s planned divestment at SPDC’s head office in Lagos State. Coincidentally, the next day, on Wednesday, 22 May 2024, the House of Representatives took the highly commendable step of adopting the motion that oil multinationals exiting Nigeria be disallowed from divesting their assets without remediating environments degraded by their years of oil exploration and exploitation in the country.

These issues are critically evaluated in articles published in this exciting edition.

This edition also discusses other Big and Hot Topics of interest to our readers. For example, in light of the forward leap in the fight against Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs), this 44th edition features articles that explain how GMOs are connected to issues of biosafety, human rights, and the hunger crisis. Armed with these evidence-supported insights, we reiterate that agroecology remains the viable solution to the hunger crisis. Similarly, this edition contains an article on bush burning and its link to the impoverishment of soil and the mounting food shortages in our local communities.

One of the articles details the story of a youth from Makoko, a challenged fishing settlement in Lagos, Nigeria, who shares her experience as a participant in the April 2024 ‘One Ocean Week’ event held in Norway, outlining her action plans going forward. We also share with you a report from the last general strategy meeting of the Africa Climate Justice Collective, in which HOMEF participated. As you know, we never leave you without some hope-filled pieces. Enjoy the poems and the exciting story “Animi and the Fatalities in Orira” that continues from the 43rd edition of our Eco-Instigator.

It’s always a delight to hear and read from you. Please know that we never stop looking forward to receiving your feedback, stories, articles, poems, or photos. Continue to share with us at editor@homef.org or home@homef.org.

Until Victory!
Nnimmo Bassey
Director, Health of Mother Earth Foundation (HOMEF)
For more than 60 years, Nigeria’s oil-bearing communities and their ecosystems have suffered the pernicious effects of oil and gas exploration, ranging from massive pollution of water, land, and air—leading to the loss of livelihoods and biodiversity, health defects and declining life span—to conflicts and loss of lives. Capitalist corporations and the complicit governments that abet them have, instead of identifying fossil exploration for what it is and its link to climate change continued to present false solutions to climate change impacts. This is all in a bid to allow the fossil industry to continue profiteering from the lives of community people. Instead of the very urgently needed climate action of leaving the fossils in the ground and transiting to a people-centred energy mix, the polluters and their enablers have proposed several smokescreen solutions, including those built to capture, store and re-use carbon already emitted in the atmosphere.

The way to build a climate-resilient future is to focus on healing impacted territories and the world at large from the deleterious impacts of the fossil industry. A starting point would be to desist from crass denial of these impacts and for world leaders to embrace real actions and shun false solutions. In view of this, Health of Mother Earth Foundation (HOMEF) held a two-day School of Ecology (SoE) session in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, from 20 – 21 March 2024. The purpose was to build knowledge and create a platform for traumatised community people to identify their traumas and the impacts of the changing climatic conditions on their lives and land. The SoE session also focused on equipping the people to champion the move away from fossil addiction while also paving the way for healing through arts.

The people of Okoroutip in Akwa Ibom State and Eteo community in Eleme LGA of Rivers State were among the participants in the SoE. Both communities have been highly impacted by crude oil exploration. These community people, alongside other participants like CSO members, former SoE scholars, students from the University of Uyo, Akwa Ibom State and Niger Delta University, Amasoma, Bayelsa State and virtual attendees explored, "The way to build a climate-resilient future is to focus on healing impacted territories and the world at large from the deleterious impacts of the fossil industry".
together with facilitators of the different sessions of the SoE, the paths to weaning and healing from fossil fuel. The session also featured the exploration of artistic tools that could help steer people towards the much-needed healing. From folklore and cultural norms as tools for healing to poems and music, and further to the sharing of stories of resilience from Okoroutip and Eteo communities in Nigeria, as well as from people and communities in South-East Asia and Latin America who participated virtually. The tools provided relatable communication modes and means of healing to the participants.

The SoE delved into measures towards weaning the world from fossil addiction. The participants explored how communities can form alliances, such as the use of the Niger Delta Alternatives Convergence (NDAC) Manifesto as a tool to resist the further expansion of the deadly crude oil exploration, the key action of demanding total cleanup and restoration of the Niger Delta region and the ways through which communities can confront ecological harms and associated traumas that come from ecoanxiety. The SoE session emphasised the usefulness of art as a healing therapy and the need to educate state actors on the falsehood of projected market-based solutions to climate crises.

While exploring the topic of ‘Overcoming Fossils Addiction,’ the Director of HOMEF, Nnimmo Bassey, explained that “To stop [fossil] addiction, the first thing is to depetrolize [our world], not just to decarbonise, #Yasunize and #Ogonize the world … following the Yasuni [in Ecuador] and Ogoni [in Nigeria] examples, kicking the polluters out of our territories and calling for the world to keep the fossils in the ground.” He added, “We need to reconnect with nature, own our narratives, [and] use a new term to describe our preferred narrative.” In shaping our preferred narrative, the SoE participants were encouraged to let polluters know that there is no room for the continuation of fossil exploration and that it is no longer business as usual.

Ken Henshaw, Executive Director of We the People, dissected the ‘NDAC Manifesto for Socioecological Justice’ as a key tool for wellness. He cited the unprecedented looting of the Niger Delta and extraction of the region’s natural resources with impunity as core reasons for the drafting of the manifesto. According to Ken Henshaw, “For us to heal, we need to know where we got sick…. to understand all the symptoms of our collective sicknesses.” In exploring modalities for healing, Mr Ken noted the importance of establishing the interconnectedness between flood incidents, oil spills in the Niger Delta, Tsunamis, heat waves, desertification and other climate disasters in other parts of the world. Healing would also require a good understanding of these issues and a rejection of coloniality. Defeating coloniality, Ken Henshaw explained, is possible if we “interrogate and understand our image, our worth and capacity, our knowledge and systems, our values and priorities, our reality, and our own road to development.” To close his session, he stated: “For us to wean [our communities] from fossils and heal, we need to unite our people behind our core demands (reparations, environmental justice, restoration, climate debts and building peoples’ power), find more creative ways for these demands for justice and be persistent with the demands.”

This is because “the more you say a thing, the more you have a chance of being heard and [the] possibility of effecting your desired change,” he emphasised.

According to Tijah Bolton, Director of Policy Alert, who spoke on ‘Carbon Speculations and Rupturing of Communities,’ using Stubbs Creek as a case study, “Weaning will lead us to healing!” Mr Bolton narrated that Stubbs Creek, which houses the biggest oil well (OML 13) in Africa, has been turned into a dump for wastewater from oil exploration. The creek is a major forest reserve in Akwa Ibom State: “unfortunately, pollution has taken hold of the forest cover in the creek, eroding its greenery,” Mr Bolton decried. While the polluting activities of the oil sector in Akwa Ibom State are ongoing, the governor is said to have recently announced that the state is set to start carbon trading—a false and market-based capitalist solution to carbon emissions “which sees forests and trees as excuses for industrialised countries to continue emitting while forest communities can be paid a conscience-salving premium to sink their carbon,” Mr Bolton iterated. Such false approaches appear to be the favourite schemes...
projected by the government and industries. These schemes, exemplified by the carbon market, are designed to make the world to feel good while undermining real climate actions.

Mr Bolton stressed that “carbon offsetting and speculation must be put to bed as they are based on the same market model that caused the climate crisis.” A problem cannot be solved by the same means used to create it. He called on CSOs and CBOs to strengthen solidarity to resist the last takeover by the fossil fuel industry and make an effort to properly educate state actors on the climate crisis and the fallacy of most projected solutions.

“For us to wean [our communities] from fossils and heal, we need to unite our people behind our core demands - reparations, environmental justice, restoration, climate debts and building peoples’ power”.

Concerning the issue of “Building Communities’ Solidarity for Wellness and Wellbeing,” Mr Akinbode Oluwafemi shared that the eight dimensions of wellness include the spiritual, occupational, social, emotional, environmental, physical, intellectual and associated wellness risk factors against activists (workplace environment, team members, financial fulfilment, career fulfilment, social factors, lifestyle). He stressed the need for self-care, stating that self-care is not selfishness as an individual needs to be healthy for the community to be healthy.

Speaking on ‘Ecoanxiety, Trauma and Wellbeing,’ Jennifer Uchendu of Susty Vibes and the Omega Resilience Awards Africa Fellowship stated that a return to the times of story sharing, folklore and community circles would help bring healing from traumas and ecoanxiety. She defined ecoanxiety as the spectrum of emotions that people feel in relation to the climate and environmental crisis. According to Ms Jennifer, there is an interplay between ecoanxiety and other mental health that people are experiencing. She informed participants that there is a project—TEAP (The Ecoanxiety Africa Project)—which explores the interconnections between mental health and climate change and their intersections with other environmental problems. She called on journalists, especially those present at the SoE, to help educate the world on ecoanxiety and for CSOs to help educate trauma workers on ecoanxiety, which she believes is an under-discussed issue.

Exploring the ‘Culture of Life’ and healing through arts, Babawale Obayanju listed anger, pain, and uneasiness as some of the symptoms of sickness in communities. Scholars at the SoE believe that football and comedy constitute art forms that are helping to keep Nigerians sane amidst the myriad life-threatening issues in the country. According to Mr Obayanju, art evokes good emotions and is a form of therapy with the power to help people heal. It holds the power to change the way people see the world. This is because art points people to new perspectives, ideas, and values, and provides avenues for the expression of new ideas and emotions and for creating awareness of social issues. He implored the scholars to embrace art and encourage artists to understand that they hold the key to the healing of communities.

Comments from the scholars showed their commitment to using art—music, writing, etc.—purposefully to bring healing to their communities. The SoE session ended with Nnimmo Bassey’s rendition of his art, the poem, ‘I See the Invisible.’
ILLEGAL DIVESTMENT IS AN ENVIRONMENTAL CRIME

By Fidelis Allen

The Human and Environmental Development Agenda (HEDA) Resources Centre, in collaboration with the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), organised its annual anti-corruption workshop situation room at Visa Karina Hotels, Wonodi Street Close, GRA Phase 111, Port Harcourt, Rivers State on Thursday, 18 April 2024. The theme of the workshop for this year was the divestment of oil assets. This article is based on my participation in the meeting as an invitee who had the privilege of participating in the discussions and observing the arguments and reactions of a highly mixed audience and a star-studded team of experienced speakers.

Two papers were presented after several remarks offered by representatives of the Nigerian Police, Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), Rivers State Ministry of Environment, Nigerian Civil Defence Corps, civil society organisations, and host communities to oil companies in the Niger Delta. Participants included researchers, academics, representatives of relevant government agencies, non-governmental organisations, and communities in the Niger Delta. Among the participants who contributed to the discussions in the meeting were representatives of organisations partnering with Both ENDS, Kebeleka Women Development & Resource Centre, and Oleigh Centre for Community Development (OCCD).

The main issue for discussion at the meeting was the divestment of assets in Nigeria’s oil sector. Shell, Britain’s oil giant, announced in January 2024 that it had concluded plans to sell its Nigerian subsidiary, SPDC. This article documents the lessons learned from the workshop and the implications for the work of Both ENDS partners in Nigeria. The key takeaway from the workshop is the point that any attempt by the oil majors to successfully sell off their oil assets without complying with guidelines and checklists provided by the Nigerian Upstream Petroleum Regulatory Commission (NUPRC) and without making the process inclusive with communities making input and getting the assurance of the cleanup of all polluted places in the Niger Delta before divesting will amount to illegal divestment.

It was emphasised that illegal divestment should be regarded as an environmental crime that should be prevented and punished. The biggest lesson, therefore, is the implications for advocacy with the office of the Minister of Petroleum Resources, NUPRC, National Assembly, National Oil Spill Detection and Response Agency (NOSDRA), National Environmental Standards, and Regulations Enforcement Agency (NESREA), oil majors, and the federal and state ministries of environment as destinations.

The keynote paper was given by the Chief Executive Officer of the Nigerian Upstream Petroleum Regulatory Commission (NUPRC), Engr Gbenga Komolafe, who was represented by Dr Kelechi O. Ofogbe, NUPRC’s Executive Commissioner in charge of Corporate Services and Administration. He spoke on the topic: ‘The Implications of Divestment of Oil Assets by
International Oil Companies on Oil-Producing Areas and the Appropriate Response by Citizens of Producing Communities to Risks such as Environmental Pollution, Human and Socioeconomic Rights Violations That May Be Occasioned.” He started by stating that divestment itself is a strategic business idea dealing with change of ownership, which is not new in Nigeria. In this case, divestment of oil assets has been ongoing since 2010 with SPDC. Divestment started in Nigeria as early as the 1970s.

However, there is controversy around the nature and meaning of oil asset divestment in Nigeria because of its complex nature. This has been a troubling concern. However, the propriety of Shell divesting its oil mining leases in the past without proper regulation was unanimously condemned by all including the speaker who stated that the new NUPRC was set to do the right thing. It is worth noting that divestment is not mentioned expressly in Nigeria’s petroleum laws, including the Petroleum Industry Act (PIA). Additionally, the laws do not provide adequate measures for punishing what ought to have been seen as environmental crime on the grounds of ignoring guidelines in decommissioning, abandoning, and divesting oil assets. This makes it a complex issue, with the oil companies ready to exploit the loophole to evade liabilities if the regulators are not careful to ensure that the companies follow due process.

The CEO of NUPRC disclosed in his talk that the NUPRC is the key regulator in oil divestment in Nigeria. He argued that the current process of SPDC divestment announced by Shell UK has not gone through because of its stringent measures to ensure compliance with the regulator’s checklist. The suggestion that host communities’ interest should be a key concern in the duty of the Commission was as much welcome. The checklist, which was not immediately available for reference before the audience at the workshop, was said to contain
five major areas that divesting companies are expected to meet to qualify for recommendation to the Minister for clearance. These areas are (1) legal considerations, (2) asset development profile, (3) data repatriation, (4) health and safety (environment and community consideration), and (5) financial consideration. Each of these broad areas of requirements was said to have specific documents of proof of compliance in the overall interest of communities, the environment, and the country.

“Any attempt by the oil majors to successfully sell off their oil assets without complying with guidelines and checklists provided by the NUPRC ... without making the process inclusive with communities making input and getting the assurance of the cleanup of all polluted places...before divesting will amount to illegal divestment”.

In the presentation, the role of the regulator, NUPRC, in the divestment process was emphasized. The role cuts across the five aforementioned areas, which all aim to ensure that divesting companies comply with the Commission’s guidelines and checklist to qualify for recommendation to the Minister of Petroleum Resources. The CEO insisted that no divestment would be approved without the companies meeting the requirements, which he said were intended to protect the environment, communities, and the interests of Nigeria. Interestingly, the Minister has the ultimate power or authority to approve all divestments.

The workshop provided an opportunity for stakeholders to engage with the issue of divestment in the oil sector from the perspectives of government agencies, communities, non-governmental organisations and researchers. Key among the government agencies was the NUPRC, which clearly had a point to make to the audience considering the recent condemnation of the announcement made by Shell UK concerning the sale of its Nigeria subsidiary, SPDC, to Renaissance Energy, a consortium (of five companies). The CEO also remarked that all aspects of the checklist are being followed through with the oil majors. As earlier stated, the regulator assured the audience of its resolve to ensure that no aspect of the checklist is ignored by the divesting companies.

Response to the CEO’s talk was, however, diverse and suggestive of disbelief, doubt and suspicion. Some people believe that the NUPRC does not have any checklist or guideline for divestment. Even the representative of the Ministry of Environment in Rivers State said the NUPRC works in silos without collaborating with the ministry, which casts doubt on the integrity of the NUPRC. The claim by the NUPRC that it had a checklist on its website was widely refuted by those who searched unsuccessfully for it on the organisation’s website. It appears it was not actually there until recently, following criticisms from some quarters. However, there was no evidence that the document is available for public viewing. One participant argued that the SPDC had been involved in the selling of its oil mining leases for several years without the intervention of the NUPRC and guidelines.

The questions that followed the CEO’s presentation touched on many aspects of the emerging issues. There were signals of harm from the present threats and risks following fears of government agencies such as NOSDRA giving clearance to oil companies to sell their assets. Some have argued that companies rely on faulty and corrupt processes to secure such clearance to divest their assets. The divestment process excludes communities who have borne the brunt of the oil business for many years and desire the companies not to leave without fixing the mess they have created through the pollution of water, land, and air. The Minister has the power to approve all divestment on NUPRC’s recommendation. The point was made of the risk of the Minister, in an attempt to please his political benefactor, being in a hurry to allow the divestment to have a smooth ride against the interest of communities.

The second talk, presented by Nicholas Hildyard, co-director of Corner House, UK, critiqued
the perspectives offered by the regulator. As he argued, “…even as we speak, Shell would appear to be using a legal sleight of hand to cut and run from its Niger Delta operations without addressing the numerous environmental and human rights abuses that have arisen through Shell’s operations.” He dwelled on Shell’s proposed sale of SPDC and the red flag over the Consortium’s finances. The key messages included breaches of NUPRC guidelines, and the weak financial capacity of the Consortium. For example, there is no evidence, as required, of a report on the assessment of surface facilities, which is one of the requirements in the NUPRC checklist that expects divesting companies to provide evidence of the state of the asset. There is also no evidence of an assessment of the environment to determine damage and liabilities. Finally, the doubtful financial ability of the Consortium is an issue which is expected to undermine its willingness to handle any environmental liabilities incurred.

The discussions at the meeting and lessons learned have several implications for advocacy. The conversations established the lack of readiness of the oil majors to sell off their assets due to their current failure to comply with the purported checklist provided by the NUPRC. The workshop implied that the NUPRC will be standing with the host communities and the people of Nigeria to ensure that oil majors comply with the guidelines for divestment. But notably, the checklist has no punitive measures for non-compliance. What remains unclear is who assumes the risk if agencies of government secretly give the oil majors a clean bill of health to divest, given the contested and politically explosive nature of the oil economy. The Minister of Petroleum, who has the final authority to approve divestment, is politically subservient to higher powers, especially the President and the domineering influence of the oil majors.

The political economy of oil and gas production is complex, with people in political offices ready to act forcefully in the interest of dominant powers in order to secure their positions and interests. The years in which crude oil has developed as a major source of income for all levels of government have been accompanied by interests within and outside the country such that those who depend on the industry to survive, legally or illegally, now belong to a cartel. This context provides the reason for civil society to act innovatively in responding to the question of how best to protect communities and the environment in the whole discussion around divestment.

First, activists should engage the office of the Minister of Petroleum, the NUPRC, the National Assembly, and other relevant agencies of the government is imperative. Advocacy directed targeting the NUPRC, the office of the Minister, and the President is vital to ensuring that the oil companies do not leave a legacy of environmental woes in communities, as it is perceived that the new companies taking over the oil and gas assets lack the financial muscle and commitment to be responsible corporate citizens. However, framing the issues in terms of the risk of environmental crime and the impact on human and non-human life now and in the future is crucial. In taking the matter to these relevant offices, communities and the media must be carried along in non-violent and constructive ways.

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Niger Delta is a region blessed with biodiversity and natural resources, the most fertile and greenest part of Nigeria has since the discovery and exploration of oil in commercial quantity, experienced what would be described as retrogression.

The discovery of oil that was supposed to bring in progress, wealth, and improvement of the livelihood to the people in the region brought hardship, despoliation, pain, injustice, violence, and the destruction of livelihoods. The Director of Health of Mother Earth Foundation (HOMEF), Nnimmo Bassey, succinctly captured the Niger Delta situation in one of his poems, ‘We thought it was oil, but it was blood.’ The poem explains, in simple terms, the horror and pain that the communities bear because of oil.

From cases mostly falsely reported as sabotage of oil pipelines to the conscious dumping of oil waste products into water bodies in the region, there have been immeasurable amounts of pollution in the Niger Delta. The oil and gas sector in the region is fraught with abandonment and lack of decommissioning of aged and worn-out oil and gas facilities, which is a major factor contributing to oil spillages and the sprouting of illegal refineries scattered around the creeks of oil-bearing communities in the delta, further polluting the waters, land, and air in the region. Accidents at sea involving vessels carrying oil products and decades of ever-glaring gas flares are other causes of pollution in the region. Communities in the region have been ripped.

The federal government, in cahoots with the polluting corporations, try to cover up the destructive impacts of the sector and project exploration of oil and gas as the economic silver bullet. This notwithstanding, some concerned citizens have taken it upon themselves to monitor the sector by shining a light on the ills and impacts of crude oil exploitation and exploration in the Niger Delta. Comrade Morris Alagoa has been at the forefront of environmental monitoring and advocacy for many years. His over three decades of experience in monitoring, reporting and advocacy in the Niger Delta earned him recognition by HOMEF as a
wisdom holder in the field.

In a one-day Learning from the Wise (LftW) session held on 11 April 2024, HOMEF invited Comrade Alagoa to share his experiences, wisdom and lessons learnt over the years with HOMEF’s eco-defenders, new and upcoming monitors, and students from across the Niger Delta. The session was held in Bayelsa State, in a tales-by-moonlight setting where participants sat on mats around the wisdom holder. The session was an opportunity for participants to glean wisdom on best practices in monitoring from the years of experience of Comrade Alagoa. It also availed participants the space to interrogate the linkages between monitoring, traditional knowledge, and the just energy transition that the world so desperately needs.

During the session, Comrade Alagoa took time to share his experiences in the field, including the challenges of restrictions from entering spill sites posed by the military and the companies involved in the pollution cases. He shared the strategies he used to navigate through all the challenges of field monitoring and achieve good success on his trips. He shared key points for successful monitoring, reporting and advocacy, one of which is knowing the importance of truthfulness in the process of reporting. According to Comrade Alagoa, evidence gathered in lies and built on cover-ups stands the chance of jeopardising court case for the community people if such evidence is used in adjudicating a case. He also spoke on timing, stating how a quick response time to cases of pollution is essential to avoid cover-ups by the government or colluding companies. Also, responding in time, especially in the early hours of the morning (in cases where the event happened overnight), according to him, allows the monitor to sneak in and gather his evidence before other interested parties (some of whom seek to cover up for the government and oil companies) show up. Another key point was the importance of giving the evidence gathered from monitoring a voice. By this, he meant the sharing of reports produced from the evidence gathered to enable a wider audience to be aware of and follow the situation. Also vital to the monitor are skills for community entry and engagement, as well as having the right tools and equipment, including spares and duplicates.

Comrade Alagoa also shared some survival tips that environmental monitors need to know. One of the tips is to ensure that people—reputable and trusted persons, including other activists, monitors and even the media—are aware of one’s whereabouts. It is such people who will make a call to concerned stakeholders and authorities in cases where a monitor is abducted in an attempt to silence the report. The comrade also stated that over-socialising with and accepting gifts from the community people may be a risk factor for monitors. Reports from monitors can serve as vital material for evidence-based advocacy; evidence cannot be denied and should not be manipulated.

Connecting monitoring, advocacy and just energy transition (JET), Comrade Alagoa tried to explain how monitoring and advocacy are important in the push for a just energy transition. He first spoke about the need to make the transition process inclusive, stating that presently, community people are not aware of the intricacies of the JET, what the government is doing and what their role is in the whole process. Monitoring can produce evidence-based reports that become veritable organising tools in intensifying the call for just energy transition in solidarity with community people. Morris Alagoa took the participants on a journey through history, exploring a time when traditional norms and cultures underpinned the conservation and preservation of ecosystems. He encouraged a return to some of those norms, which included fishing festivals, forest fallows, amongst others.

The comrade did not shy away from sharing how his hopes for a better Niger Delta now look bleak. However, he stated strongly that forming the path to a better future for the region would require the Niger Delta youth to stay resilient, demand accountability from the leaders, arm themselves with knowledge and challenge the status quo. He encouraged the LftW participants not to lose hope but rather to let the state of the region inspire them to take action and commit to being vanguards and sentinels of the region.

The LftW session was attended by students, the head of the department of environmental studies, and the deputy vice chancellor of the Niger Delta University. Other participants were drawn from three Niger Delta states—Rivers, Delta and Bayelsa. They all pledged to carry on the good works of Comrade Alagoa in monitoring, reporting and advocacy in the region.
In Africa's history, a tale unfolds

By Boaventura Monjane

In Africa's history, a tale unfolds, of invasion, plunder, and stories untold. Colonial powers, with greed as their guide, Robbed the land of its riches, with no place to hide.
From the shores of the Atlantic to the depths of the Nile, Africa’s wealth was looted in a ruthless style. Knowledge and resources, stolen away,

Leaving behind scars that still mark today. But amidst the darkness, a light did shine,

As thinkers and leaders rose in their prime. Du Bois and Garvey, voices so strong, Nkrumah, Nyerere, who knew right from wrong.

Lumumba, Cabral, fighters so brave, Makeba, Samora, Thambo, whose spirits we crave. Men and women, in equal measure,

Fought for justice, for freedom, for treasure.

Women leaders, buried in history’s fold, Brave and wise, their stories untold. From resistance to occupation and strife,

Their contributions shaped Africa’s life. Their voices echoed through slavery’s chains, Challenging patriarchy, breaking its reins.

Against colonialism, they stood tall, In their strength and wisdom, they gave their all.

Through struggles and strife, they fought to reclaim, Their land and their dignity, no longer the same. Triumph they did, independence at hand,

Liberation and democracy, spreading across the land.

But the journey was far from over, you see, For Africa still faced adversity. Neoliberal capitalism, neo-colonial chains,

Resource grabbing, leaving scars and stains.

Yet in the face of these challenges, there arose, Progressive intellectuals, who boldly chose, To stand up and resist, to fight for change,

To build a future where all can arrange.

From the bustling cities to the savannah’s expanse, Africa’s beauty, it continues to dance. With abundant sun and fertile lands,

And wealth in its resources and its people’s hands.

So let us rise, with hope in our hearts, For a future where justice never departs.

We will triumph, we will prevail, and build a world where all can set sail.

Africa will thrive, its people and nature, in harmony and peace, shaping the future.

So head up, my friend, and let it be known, We’ll create a world where all can be shown. Head up, my friend, heap up my Comrade!

[Boaventura Monjane is the Solidarity Programme Officer for West Africa and Haiti at Grassroots International. He is a scholar-activist and journalist from Mozambique.]
Nigeria, like many other African nations, stands at a crossroads to its food future. The stark choice is between adopting agricultural biotechnology in line with the industrial, capitalist-oriented agricultural model and taking the path of agroecology (which is regenerative agriculture). The former, in the guise of enhancing agricultural productivity and fostering economic development, locks in monocultures, loss of biodiversity, seed monopoly and seed/food colonialism. Conversely, the latter delivers increased productivity and economic resilience, as well as nourishes and revives ecosystems, strengthens local economies, mitigates climate/environmental crises, and promotes food sovereignty. The former promotes genetically modified organisms (GMOs), while the latter discourages their use. Nigeria is at the critical point of choosing which path to take, bearing in mind the consequences of each model.

GMOs ride on the wave of global fetishisation of technology, by which technology is considered a silver bullet. Besides

“The complex threats and attendant risks of agricultural biotechnology make it expedient that we examine the implications of GMOs through the lens of fundamental human rights”.

By Nnimmo Bassey
posing difficulties to regulatory frameworks, these technologies have a direct impact on humans as well as the socio-economic rights of peoples. The complex threats and attendant risks of agricultural biotechnology make it expedient that we examine the implications of GMOs through the lens of fundamental human rights. It is important to understand that GMOs represent a paradigm shift in agriculture.

One indisputable fact about GMOs which even their promoters cannot gainsay is that genetically modified plants, animals, or microorganisms have undergone fundamental changes at the cellular level and can no longer be considered natural. Most of them are engineered to withstand dangerous herbicides that kill other species, except engineered ones. Other crops are genetically engineered to act as pesticides, ostensibly to kill identified pests that would otherwise attack the crop or seeds. Examples include Bt Cotton and Bt Cowpea or beans that have been approved for commercial release in Nigeria. The implication of eating a seed engineered to kill a pest is that one is inadvertently eating a pesticide with unexamined implications, including those on the microbes in our guts.

GMOs are promoted in Nigeria on the premise of addressing food insecurity. However, almost three decades after their introduction globally, they have not eradicated or reduced hunger. Rather, they lock in the system that promotes hunger by degrading soil, reducing biodiversity, disregarding the knowledge of local food producers, and concentrating power in the hands of a few market players whose only interest is profiteering.

The hope of Nigeria dominating the international market and generating billions of US dollars is a pipe dream, as nations who do not endorse genetically modified crops will not accept our products.

The truth is that we do not need GMOs to feed our population. This technology threatens the lives and rights of our local farmers who have selected and preserved seeds, crops, and animal varieties over the centuries. Our farmers have kept a stock of varieties that both provide food and meet our medicinal, cultural, and other needs of our people.

In a country like Nigeria, consumers are unable to exercise the right to choose whether or not to consume GMOs due to the peculiar way food is sold and consumed in the country. Even if labelling is enforced in Nigeria, it is generally difficult to label foods and seeds because they are largely sold on the roadside, in the traffic, and in informal markets.

What is needed to enhance food production in Nigeria is the provision of various forms of support to our family farmers and the adoption of farming methods that enhance the health of our soils. Healthy soils build ecosystems that are resilient to environmental stressors, as well as help build biodiversity. These are not achievable with monocultures, which are rather vulnerable to pests. We need a system that supports farmers who need access to credits, land, infrastructure, and markets.

We have a moral obligation to steward the Earth’s resources responsibly and to preserve the integrity of our ecosystems for present and future generations. These are the hallmarks of agroecology.

Judicial officials, in their various capacities, are entrusted with upholding the rule of law and ensuring that justice prevails in our society. It is, thus, imperative that they are well-versed in the intricacies of this rapidly evolving field and risky technology. As guardians of the law, it is pertinent to ensure that the Precautionary Principle is strictly applied when anyone wishes to introduce any genetically modified organism into Nigeria. The fact that there is a requirement for risk assessment during the application stage affirms that this is a risky technology. It should be considered unconscionable that public opinion is ignored or that aspects of the regulation are left in the hands of promoters of the technology who profit from it, or vice versa.

The introduction, cultivation, and trading of GMOs, at a minimum, should adhere to robust regulatory frameworks that prioritise biosafety and safeguard the public interest. Nigeria, like many countries, has enacted legislation and established regulatory bodies to oversee the assessment, approval, and monitoring of GMOs. The National Biosafety Management Agency Act 2015 (as amended) is, however, fraught with loopholes that prevent the legislation from adequately safeguarding the health and interests of the Nigerian people. GMOs are approved for use in Nigeria in a way that does not conform
to the provisions of the Act or global best standards.

It is incumbent upon us to interpret and apply the provisions of the law judiciously, balancing the interests of innovation, agricultural sustainability, and public welfare. We cannot afford to turn our people into guinea pigs or allow promoters of the technology to deceive our farmers into believing that they are given improved seeds when, in fact, they are trapped into planting seeds of dubious safety claims.

We need to uphold transparency, public participation, and informed decision-making in matters concerning GMOs. So far, the approval process for GMOs does not recognise these elements as the responsible agency, the National Biosafety Management Agency, has gone ahead to approve GMOs despite objections from many quarters based on scientific and ethical concerns.

Judges play a crucial role in adjudicating disputes, ensuring due process, and upholding the rights of all stakeholders, including farmers, consumers, and environmental advocates. Adjudicators should resist the pressures and influence of vested interests and ensure that decisions regarding GMOs are guided by the precautionary approach, ethical principles, and scientific evidence. While technological advancements hold promises, we must not compromise the safety of our people or the integrity of our ecosystems. It is imperative to approach the issue of GMOs and biosafety with the utmost diligence, impartiality, and commitment to upholding the principles of justice.

The existence of Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) and Highly Hazardous Pesticides (HHPs) in the agricultural system has exacerbated the twin issues of hunger and climate change. To assist farmers in navigating the dangerous times, Health of Mother Earth Foundation, in collaboration with the GMO-Free Nigeria Alliance and the Network of Women and Youth in Agriculture, held a practical training on Agroecology for farmers in Enugu State, Nigeria, on 17 April 2024.

Some of the farmers at the training were involved in the cultivation of rice, cassava, mushroom, corn, vegetables, yam etc, while
EMBRACING AGROECOLOGY TO COMBAT HUNGER AND CLIMATE CHANGE

some others were involved in poultry and fishery.
A total of 124 persons attended the training, including federal extension workers across the state. The purpose of the training was to equip the farmers with knowledge of agroecology to enable them to meet the responsibility of producing safe, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food while sustaining their livelihoods in the face of hunger and climate crises.
The farmers received training on how to produce pesticides from neem plant, garlic, and chilli pepper, as well as how to produce the Jeevramruth fertiliser using various locally sourced materials, including cow dung and urine, bananas, cowpea flour etc. The training also covered sessions on agroforestry and how to promote biodiversity and soil and plant health on farms.
There was a lot of emphasis on mixed cropping, including adding flowers and trees on the farm as a way of increasing productivity, reducing the growth of weeds and the use of chemicals on the farm.

One key question addressed by the farmers was: “Is it really possible for Nigeria to improve and sustain agricultural productivity based on agroecological principles - excluding GMOs and inorganic chemicals?” About 90% of the farmers maintained that it was possible, stating that what is primarily required is a change of mindset and a revisit to age-long practices of mixed cropping, use of cover crops, crop rotation, biological pest management etc, which ensure optimum production of healthy and nutritious foods. The main concern for the other 10% was how to practise agroecology in a manner that would produce organic foods on a large scale. It was explained that agroecology can be practised on a large scale, as is already exemplified on the farm at Be the Help Foundation in Yangoje, Abuja. Learn about this foundation at https://www.bhfagroforestry.com.

Farmers can either produce organic fertilisers and pesticides on their own or in cooperatives, using locally available materials. Also, it was noted that there are already companies, like the SCL Agroindustrial Farm in Kwali, Abuja, who produce organic inputs for sale.

The trainees were enlightened about the promotion of GMOs and inorganic pesticides in Nigeria and other parts of Africa on the false premise that they would ensure food security. However, in almost a decade since the introduction of GMOs in Nigeria, the country still struggles with food insecurity.
GMOs are obviously not the solution to food insecurity. People are not hungry for lack of food but for lack of means to get the food.

During the session, one of the participants, Mrs Asogwa Juliet, noted that GMOs may seem to have some advantages but also serious disadvantages. She stated that, from her experience, the crops performed poorly after the first planting season. This underscores one of the major concerns with GMOs. It is about control over food systems as farmers are forced to go back to the corporations to purchase new GMO seeds every planting season. Other implications of GMOs in Nigeria that were highlighted include loss of biodiversity and nutritional diversity, soil degradation, and wide-ranging health complications. Mrs. Asogwa noted that the best type of agriculture is one that is aligned with nature.

“Over 76% of Nigeria’s food exports are rejected in the EU and Asia for not meeting safety standards”

Farmers were encouraged to stop the use of inorganic fertilisers and pesticides on their farms. According to a report of the Alliance for Action on Pesticides in Nigeria, more than 50% of registered pesticides in Nigeria are Highly Hazardous Pesticides (HHPs), and over 40% of the registered active pesticides are already banned in the EU and other countries of the world for not meeting safety standards. Besides the health implications, the use of these pesticides presents economic challenges for Nigeria. Over 76% of Nigeria’s food exports are rejected in the EU and Asia for not meeting safety standards. Agricultural products like beans, sesame seeds, melon seeds, dried fish, dried meat, peanut chips, groundnut, palm oil and yam exported from Nigeria have, in the past 10 years, been banned by the EU partly due to the presence of dangerous pesticide residues.

The participants deeply appreciated the training, noting that it would take away from them the cost of buying agro-chemicals, and create a space for them, in the value chain, to produce their own organic fertilisers and sell to others. Some farmers and groups, like the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), have promised to step down the training of other farmers in their communities. Also, 36 of the farmers signed up to join the GMO-Free Nigeria Alliance.

During the training, some action points were noted, including that the Federal Government of Nigeria ban the use of GMOs, ensure the preservation of local/natural seed varieties, and increase support for farmers through timely provision of needed infrastructure, access to credit and access to land especially for women. Another was that the Ministry of Agriculture should provide support and promote agroecology, including ensuring access to organic fertilisers and pesticides as well as quality seeds. The Federal Ministry of Agriculture was also called upon to collaborate with organisations like HOM EF and Be the Help Foundation to organise more training sessions on the production of organic pesticides and fertilisers and on how to improve productivity using agroecological principles.
Every promise they made now preyed upon his mind.
He sat up in his sleep, staring into a foggy future with eyes closed.
Night and day, each day’s realities only gnawed at his tomorrow.

Just yesterday, the fields wore happy green leaves.
The harvest was a sure paycheck from Mother Earth.
Tomorrow’s joy was a given, the night before was serene.

Until they came to till, not only the soil but the waters too.
They tilled, splashed and spilled blood meant to be left inside.
The land, waters and the air grieved their loss.

We cleaned the sweat dripping down their forehead as they tilled,
Washed their stained sleeves and licked off crumbs from their plates.
It was our duty, the one percent, of us that they pitied.

The few who stayed back in our fields battled a paralyzing trend.
Waking up to suffocating mornings and fields gasping for air became the norm.
The plants were struck with incurable paralysis and eventual death.

Then they came again with savoury drinks for the field and the plants.
One could hear the worms that fed the shrubs screaming in the dead of the night.
And the nightmares intensified for the cultivators and food bearers.

But again, they came with seeds of many deadly colours, plotting to displace ours.
They clothed our seeds in rags and gave them horns.
Some of our cultivators saw our seeds and fled from the blessings of Mother Earth.

We need no more fury in the soil and death in the fields.
Our seeds and deeds, our foods and delicacies will be preserved.
We are awake, we know and we say, NO!

Wide awake now, he knew exactly what needed to be done.
It was time to amplify the NO,
And by every good means say NO.
The Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety (CPB) to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the Biosafety Protocol for short, is an international agreement on biosafety. It was adopted in Montreal, Canada, on 29 January 2000 and came into force on 15 May 2013. The Biosafety Protocol seeks to protect biological diversity from the potential risks posed by genetically modified organisms (GMOs) resulting from modern biotechnology. It remains the only international legally binding instrument for the regulation of GMOs. It asserts that products resulting from the application of modern biotechnology should be based on the “PRECAUTIONARY PRINCIPLE,” which stipulates the need to balance public health, environmental and ecosystem considerations against economic benefits.

Like most signatory countries, Nigeria signed the Protocol in 2000 and ratified it when it came into force in 2003, which makes Nigeria obliged to domesticate and implement it. It is on this premise that the country crafted a National Biosafety Bill, enacted into a BIOSAFETY LAW, which enabled the establishment of a national competent authority known as the “National Biosafety Management Agency (NBMA).” The agency provides the regulatory framework and institutional and administrative mechanisms for safety measures in the application of modern biotechnology and its products in Nigeria.

The primary function of the agency is to prevent any “adverse” effect of biotechnology and its products on humans, animals, plants, and environmental health. The agency also regulates emerging modern biotechnology derivatives, like gene editing, gene drive, and synthetic biology, and puts measures in place to ensure biosecurity in Nigeria. However, in strict observation and operational terms, the agency seems to function in a “GMO adverse effect free” workspace promoting the adoption and use of GMOs/products and the application of biotechnology.

The national competent authority has developed a national policy on biosafety, established a biosafety framework and analytical laboratory for the detection and regulation of genetically modified organisms (GMOs), as well as developed biosafety regulatory instruments and guidelines. Some of the instruments and guidelines include GMO risk assessment and risk management guidelines, risk communication strategy, guidelines for the inspection of facilities, and biosafety permit applications for containment, confined and multi-location field trials. Others are commercial release, import/export, practices and, recently, guidelines for genome editing, gene editing, gene drive, synthetic biology, and measures to ensure biosecurity, among many others.

Nigeria officially domesticated the Protocol in 2015 when the Biosafety Bill was signed into law. In 2019, the law was amended in order to expand the scope of the regulatory agency, NBMA, to include evolving components of biotechnology such as gene drives, gene editing, and synthetic biology. Currently, the bill establishing the NBMA provides the only existing legal and regulatory instrument on biosafety in Nigeria.
Nigeria. However, there are several dissenting voices on the gaps in the law, calling not only for its repeal but an outright ban of GMOs in Nigeria.

A few years ago, Health of Mother Earth Foundation (HOMEF) and a group of concerned stakeholders challenged the biosafety law in court. Even though a cause of action was established, the presiding judge held that the court was compelled to strike out the suit because it appeared statute barred. This means that the suit was brought a year after the permits had been issued. Even though the case was lost on technical grounds, the team of lawyers involved identified a number of gaps in the law to negate its implementation. The gaps included the fact that the Act is meant to implement provisions of international treaties like the “Convention on Biological Diversity” and the “Cartagena Protocol to the Convention on Biological Diversity” on matters relating to GMOs. These treaties uphold the precautionary principle, but Nigerian courts have yet to take the precautionary principle seriously.

It is crucial to bridge any “knowledge gap” that could exist in the legal system and champion adjudication of future litigation. The approval and adoption of GMOs as a panacea for food security, self-sufficiency and development depicts a violation of the fundamental human rights of Nigerian citizens with utter disregard for issues of fairness, equity, and justice. Another gap was that the Act gives room for regulatory capture, which occurs when a special interest is prioritised over public interest, leading to a net loss for society. This is demonstrated by the presence of major promoters of biotechnology, such as the National Biotechnology Development Agency (NABDA), on the board of the National Biosafety Management Agency (NBMA), which is the regulatory agency created by the law. Again, the Act deviates from the basic tenets of “Liability and Redress” explicitly defined in the protocol and instead (subsumes) institutes a fault-based type of liability and redress in which the petitioner must prove that a defendant’s conduct was either negligent or intentional. This approach is clearly against strict liability and redress requirements of the protocol, which is consistent with the precautionary principle that allows the imposition of liability on a party without finding fault.

The precautionary principle, as enunciated in the Cartagena Protocol, states that where there are threats of serious damage, lack of full scientific certainty shall not be used as a reason for postponing cost-effective measures to prevent environmental degradation. Thus, cost-effective measures such as halting the promotion of GMOs should not be dependent on scientific proof. While the Cartagena Protocol prescribes “Prior Informed Consent (PIC)”, the Act is silent on PIC for genetically modified products meant for food and feed that are expected to have prior approvals by the National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC). There is no evidence that NAFDAC has a role in the implementation of the Act. One more gap is that the element of choice, enabled by clear labelling of GMO products, is suppressed.

The way out of these challenges is for organised objection to GMOs to be intensified and sustained. Consortiums calling for a ban on GMOs should be empowered through an evidence-based process to continuously provide information on the harmful effects of GMOs on humans and human health, plant and animal ecosystems and the environment in general. The approach should be through education, information exchange and persuasion of the general consumer public to better understand the issue of GMOs and their harmful impact. Also vital is sustained dialogue with policymakers on the overstated advantage of GMOs as the panacea for food security and self-sufficiency in Nigeria and drive the need for policy reversal relevant to GMOs. Lobbying of the National Assembly using superior arguments on the harmful effects of GMOs and the need to repeal and/or undertake an extensive review of the existing legislation to adequately address the gaps as identified above, is key. We must stay focused, persistent, committed, and steadfast with evidence-based information (superior facts) to educate and lobby those who have yet to fully understand the issues.

[Johnson Ekpere is a Professor of Agricultural Extension Administration and member of the International University Network on Cultural and Biological Diversity, International Scientific Committee (IUNCBD-ISC).]
Burning Bushes, Impoverished Soils, and the Intensifying Food Crisis

By Franklin Obazu

Year after year, before each planting season, many farmers engage in the practice of bush burning across farming communities in Nigeria. The world is struggling with food crises as agricultural and food systems are infiltrated by dangerous ideologies and technologies. In Nigeria, many indigenous farming practices and systems tend to normalise dangerous farming practices, thus exacerbating the food crisis in the nation. Sadly, the impact is more on communities which are the working grounds of subsistent and small-scale farmers.

Bush burning is putting subsistence farming at high risks, but many do not
care to think about. Bush burning interferes with normal biological processes that occur in the soil due to its impact on the physicochemical properties of the soil.

As community farmlands are continuously burnt, the soil degrades with the destruction of organic matter, loss of nutrients, alteration of potential of hydrogen (pH), and degradation of structure. These changes can result in reduced soil fertility, increased erosion risk, and ultimately hinder agricultural productivity. When bush burning occurs, there is a combustion of organic matter present in the farmland vegetation. This organic matter serves as a vital source of nutrients for the soil. When burned, these nutrients are released into the atmosphere as gases, leaving the soil depleted of essential elements. It therefore goes without saying that the singular act of bush burning has significant negative effects on soil nutrient levels and total soil health. Successful mitigation of the food crisis is impossible in the absence of healthy soil. While some might argue that hydroponics or soil-less cultivation technology provides an alternative to soil-based farming, in reality it offers no solution to the food crisis.

It is not just a mirage but also extremely implausible for local communities and food producers grappling with farmlands degraded by oil, gas, and other polluting substances and chemicals. Above all, soil-less cultivation is the negation of care of the earth or geoponics, which is what agriculture means. Promoting soil-less farming would mean indirectly justifying and directly caring less or not caring at all for the soil and, consequently, the earth. The food crisis will not be solved with less care for the earth and less caution with activities such as bush burning.

One of the most critical chemical elements/nutrients affected by bush burning is carbon. Organic matter in vegetation is rich in carbon, and when burned, much of this carbon is lost to the atmosphere as carbon dioxide, exacerbating climate change, which, in turn, impacts agricultural produce. This loss of carbon reduces the soil's organic matter content, impacting its ability to hold nutrients, retain moisture, and support plant growth.

In other words, bush burning leads to the rapid combustion of organic matter present in the soil, resulting in a reduction in soil organic carbon content and adversely affecting soil structure, nutrient cycling, and water-holding capacity. Additionally, nitrogen, another crucial nutrient for plant growth, is also affected by bush burning. Nitrogen is released into the atmosphere in the form of nitrogen oxides during burning processes. This loss of nitrogen can lead to nitrogen depletion in the soil, which negatively impacts plant growth and productivity. Other essential nutrients such as phosphorus, potassium, and sulphur are also affected during bush burning. These nutrients are vital for plant growth and crop production, and their loss can lead to decreased soil fertility.

Furthermore, bush burning can alter the soil's physical structure, reducing its ability to retain water and resist erosion. The loss of vegetation covers due to burning exposes the soil to erosion, further depleting its nutrient content and reducing its fertility. Put another way, the intense heat generated during bush burning and the subsequent vegetation cover loss leaves the soil exposed to erosion by wind and water. This can lead to the loss of topsoil, which is rich in nutrients and organic matter. Soil compaction can also result from intense heat generated during bush burning—soil particles may become compacted—reducing porosity and affecting water infiltration and root growth. This can further degrade soil quality and reduce its ability to support plant growth.

Again, changes in soil pH are one possible effect of bush burning as it can alter the pH of soil, making it more acidic. This can affect the availability of essential nutrients for plant growth and can have long-term impacts on soil fertility. While it is believed that bush burning is done in preparation for the farming season, in local communities where bush burning is a common practice, there appears to be a steady decline in agricultural activities and a shortage of food despite the availability of large expanses of agricultural land.

This observation requires further investigation as it is likely to be tied to other factors, which may include increasing degradation of soil nutrients, resulting in poor soil quality and decreased agricultural productivity. Bush burning, eroding soil fertility, and dwindling agricultural activities are all matters that need to be addressed in order to tackle food shortages in communities and towns.

In trying to resolve the food crisis, it is essential to implement sustainable agricultural land management practices that aim for the preservation of soil health for future generations rather than promoting practices that further distance humanity from nature. These sustainable practices are rooted in agroecology, which targets, among other things, securing favourable soil conditions for plant growth, particularly by managing organic matter and improving soil biotic activity. Some of the
practices include conservation tillage, agroforestry, and organic farming techniques that help preserve soil health and fertility.

Raising awareness about the importance of protecting vegetation cover and reducing the incidence of bush burning can help communities commit more to preserving soil nutrients and sustainable land use practices. Such awareness initiatives would involve assisting communities in successfully implementing alternative land-clearing methods, such as minimal mechanical clearing combined with manual labour, in order to reduce the reliance on bush burning. The initiatives can also target leading communities towards creating and enforcing community farming regulations that prohibit bush burning and impose penalties on those who engage in this harmful practice.

Like with many crises in the world and even at community levels, successful tackling of the food crisis requires multi-stakeholder collaborations, especially with regard to carrying out research and building innovations with local relevance in the area of soil conservation and rehabilitation.

[Dr Franklin Obazu is a biological scientist. His writings and interests are centred around renewable energy, waste-to-energy, bioremediation, and microbiology.]

ANIMI AND THE FATALITIES IN ORIRA

By Perfect Johndick

Rumours began circulating that youths of the community frequently cut open the oil pipelines and wellheads, and this was causing the blowouts, oil spills, and fire outbreaks that were destroying the rivers and farmlands. Diverse versions of the fatalities in Orira could be picked from all corners of the mission ground. Animi’s mother, a dedicated midwife who assisted other healthcare professionals at the church’s clinic, could not help but pay keen attention to every version that her ears could pick up while overseeing pregnant women, placing them on routine workouts and encouraging them. A key part of her routine was praying for and with pregnant women; this contributed greatly to the growth of the mission, which registered about 80-90 births per year.

One fateful day, as a caesarean delivery was ongoing, a catastrophic event struck: a deafening explosion tore through the surroundings, causing a shock that instantly killed the baby. There was chaos and panic everywhere. “A pipeline had been vandalised, and there’s massive conflagration,” a man in a grey-coloured, worn-out suit was shouting to no one in particular as he ran frantically towards
the mission ground. As Animi and her siblings hurried outdoors amid the chaos, a scene of frantic individuals darting from one end to another greeted them.

The heavens blazed with giant fire, claiming many lives. Animi and her siblings froze with fear; their father had travelled for an assignment. This conflagration continued for over four hours as both indigenous and non-indigenous residents of Orira darted in between structures and bushes until they found themselves outside the community. Some people stayed behind because they had nowhere to go; if this was where death met them, they had no plan B.

In that year of the pipeline explosion, the community endured harsh conditions and unusual crises. Their taps dispensed kerosene instead of water for several days. The unfortunate consequence was the outbreak of cholera and dysentery, afflicting mostly the vulnerable: younger children and the elderly. Regrettably, the true source of the disaster remained unknown to the people of Orira, who were now fixated on the spread of oil slicks across their water bodies and their fast-depleting mangroves. They were not yet aware of the insidious soot that was stealthily enfolding their lives.

Extractive activities, leakages from the pipelines, and gas flares did not stop. Orira was experiencing a surge of different sicknesses, including heart diseases and cancers. Many of the sick people on the mission ground were suffering from sickness, which they quickly linked to the constant inhalation of what the community people called ‘gas flare soot.’ The soot was like a pervasive virus, spreading far and wide and becoming a prominent topic of discussion. Animi, on her way to school, occasionally attempted to capture this soot as she engaged her classmates in various speculations, including those that believed that the soot could be “juju” (a fetish or charm). She could not fathom how the black powder, which, while proving difficult to capture into her palms, fell carelessly on the leaves, her uniform and everywhere else, was caused by the flames that always were in her thoughts.

Apart from the fact that they had to grapple with cancer, lung diseases, and the loss of their livelihoods, the people of Orira experienced a high sea level rise. When the rains became heavy, community people whose homes were close to the river would be on guard all night, watching the river and praying that their homes were not submerged. The mission house was not spared. Animi used to be excited about the inflow of water from the river to their threshold, but as the years went on, it was no longer fun. The waters brought not only fingerlings but
also unpleasant debris from the river. During heavy rainfall, when Animi joined other children in outdoor baths, her skin reacted adversely, leaving indelible black spots. The irritation caused her discomfort, and she would spend days scratching her skin before it healed, leaving scares on her body. Her mother, concerned about her well-being, tried to keep her away from the rain, but her curiosity and desire to play with other children persisted until she turned nine.

Three years had passed since Animi and her family moved to Orita community, and it hasn’t been welcoming at all. The family went through a personal ordeal as one of her brother’s life became marred by a diagnosis of asthma, an affliction attributed to his constant exposure to the noxious gas flare soot. Some of his school days were punctuated by vicious attacks, prompting their mother to rush to his aid, often dishevelled and unprepared. Animi and her family tarried most nights, watching Ejon endure agonising struggles for breath, clinging to hope until his inhaler could fully penetrate his lungs. Animi’s father, deeply troubled by their circumstances, wished for a transfer to another city. He needed to protect his family from the harsh weather and the growing insecurity in Orita. One fateful morning, the residents of the community woke up to the ominous sound of gunshots, heralding a fierce battle between the Ereke people and Orita. Not many people had full knowledge of the circumstances surrounding the conflict. However, the dispute revolved around a refinery that Ereke claimed was constructed on their land. The violent confrontation led to a complete lockdown in the area, with gunshots blasting from the two factions for nearly a week, causing dwellers of both communities sleepless nights.

The thought of taking his family away from Orita became a heavy weight on Animi’s father. The family hails from a village called Doni in Rivers State, which shares a plight similar to Orita’s. Doni, a riverain community, lacked essential infrastructure, commercial structures, access to clean water, and functional healthcare facilities. Oil pollution was negatively impacting the once-vibrant fishing hub in Doni, degrading their waters and depleting their aquatic resources. Despite these challenges, Animi’s family yearned to return to Doni, as they found their community to be a better place for escape from the tumultuous reality of Orita. His transfer out of Orita, however, never came until he had served there for seven years.

Port Harcourt, where Animi’s father was later transferred to, was nothing different from Orita. The transfer was not a relief because, from where they lived, Animi could see another dancing gas flare. This brought back memories, fluttering from their arrival in Orita to the gas flare that was once a wonder to her, then to the fatalities and eventual departure. Animi was eleven now and had begun to smell the abnormalities; she was growing and beginning to understand certain phenomena around her. In one of her trains of thought, she recalled that two days after they arrived in Orita, one of her brothers innocently pointed out, “Daddy, Orita is black,” signifying the stark difference between Orita and other mission grounds they had been to. This memory went down her spine like a chill.

Animi was already in junior secondary school and was now conscious of her womanhood. However, she was a girl with many spots—black, irritating spots stamped on her body, probably from her regular baths in acid rain. This got her on the brink of depression; she thought of how she would be described as the girl with spotted skin, like a leopard. This thought sent a shiver through her heart.
down her spine. It was a reminder that her life, marked by black spots caused by acid rain, was the only gift Orira had offered her.

Memories of Orira never left Animi. She was now a second-year student at the University of Port Harcourt. Given the impact of the environment situation of Orira on her life, she decided to conduct research into the reasons behind Orira’s pervasive blackness and the reports of distressingly high mortality rates in the community, spanning children, young adults, and the elderly alike. It was becoming widespread knowledge that the gas flare, once a wonder, was significantly contributing to the variables that shortened the lives of the community people. The presence of Big Oil, perpetrators of the gas flare and oil spill in Orira, was also identified as the cause of the intra- and inter-community crises in the area.

Animi was pursuing a degree in finance and banking, a field seemingly unrelated to climate change and environmental degradation. Her academic vernacular was confined to the realms of economics and principles of marketing. However, her brother, Ejon’s ongoing health struggles, which made him rely daily on controlled medication and daily inhalers, ignited a fire within her. Each time she saw an opportunity to volunteer for a climate action initiative to join the struggle to preserve the environment, she was spurred into action. Another powerful source of motivation was her vision of a world devoid of gas flares, soot, oil spills, and the trauma that accompanied them. She wanted to be involved in a struggle that would allow her to contribute to securing a better planet for her yet unborn children.

Through her research, Animi came to realise that international oil companies were the primary culprits behind the calamity plaguing her community, Orira and the city of Port Harcourt where she currently resides. The audacity of openly laying pipelines through Orira community was a slap in the face of its people, she had thought to herself, fuming unknowingly. The gas flaring, a problem not exclusive to her city but also prevalent in 137 other locations across Nigeria, coupled with the provision in the Petroleum Industry Act (PIA) that postponed the end of gas flaring to 2050, represented an unjust legacy for the unborn generations.

“But how can I begin to address these pressing issues?” she would frequently ask herself.

During an extended break from school, Animi decided to align herself with an NGO dedicated to championing the rights of the Orira people, the Doni people, and the global community at large. She devoted herself tirelessly to joining voluntary campaigns, workshops, and conferences aimed at making a difference.

Animi was deeply committed to addressing the environmental challenges faced by the Orira people, collaborating with individuals and other NGOs to create comprehensive
reports on their plight and the urgent need for environmental justice. However, despite attending numerous meetings and conferences, she often felt unsatisfied with the outcomes. There were days she found herself frustrated, contemplating the government’s negligence towards the environment. She was embittered by the disheartening report that the average life expectancy for Nigerians was just 52 years, but for those living in the Niger Delta, her home, it was a mere 40 years. This grim statistic weighed heavily on her mind. “What about life expectancy for the Orira people?” she pondered.

Animi’s involvement in the environmental justice struggle and climate change activism intensified, particularly within her academic institution. She engaged fellow students in creative endeavours, encouraging them to write stories, compose songs, and create art that resonated with people and, at the same time, raised awareness about climate change. She was on her way to building an organisation that advocates for the welfare of frontline communities impacted by climate change. Her group organised marches and campaigns, calling on the government to take decisive actions to combat climate change, transition to greener energy sources, and create a more sustainable environment for the people of the Niger Delta.

Animi’s mother, at some point, became deeply concerned about her dedication to climate change advocacy, worrying for Animi’s safety. Many times, she urged her daughter to prioritise her education and let others take the lead in the fight for the environment. She once shared a hopeful vision with Animi, explaining that if she focused on her studies and obtained a good degree, they could potentially relocate their family to a country with improved atmospheric conditions and a healthier environment. In response, Animi gazed at her mother and replied, “Mom, there is no environment better than the one we’re working so hard to protect.” Her brother and everyone in her circle were drawn in by her passion for a sustainable environment; her influence on them was glaring.

A few months into her final year, she attended another conference, the “African Climate Conference.” It was the second day of the conference, but despite listening to international experts, Animi found it difficult to fully embrace the proposed solutions to climate issues. She couldn’t help but wonder if these experts truly grasped the urgency of the situation. The words of these so-called “resource persons” just felt like a veil, concealing the harsh reality of climate change’s devastating effects, she reasoned. Animi suspected that those who discussed these issues may not be directly affected by the endless floods, droughts, sea-level rise, and other climate-related challenges, which she believes explains their seemingly detached perspectives.

As Animi struggled to reconcile the conflicting viewpoints presented at the conference, she received a call that would shatter her world. It was her mother, bearing the devastating news that her brother had an attack in his place of work and had succumbed to the icy grips of death. Her phone slipped from her trembling hands, leaving her speechless and overcome by a profound sense of loss and the stark reality of the massive human cost of environmental neglect. Choking back tears, she looked at the speaker and swung her head in slow motion, from left to right and right to left, in disapproval.

[Perfect Johndick is a climate change advocate, artist, social justice enthusiast and Communications and Media Assistant at We The People]
From 13 to 19 April 2024, the One Ocean Week was held in the city of Bergen, Norway. I had the amazing opportunity of joining the One Ocean Youth Panel, which consists of a group of young people who are passionate about ocean conservation. It was an incredible experience that taught me so much and inspired me to begin to take action.

The One Ocean Youth Panel, which was held on 17 April, came under the ‘Children and Youth’ programme of the One Ocean Week and was a platform that gave the youth the opportunity to challenge the status quo with regard to the treatment of the ocean. One of the highlights of the panel was the opportunity to connect with like-minded individuals from all over the world. We shared ideas, learned from each other, and formed meaningful relationships that will last a lifetime.

We also had solution-focused discussions on pressing ocean
issues like plastic pollution, flooding, overfishing, and climate change. It was empowering to see young people taking charge and coming up with innovative solutions to these problems.

The panel emphasised the critical role of young people in driving ocean conservation efforts. It made me realise that we, the youth, have the power to make a difference and that our voices matter in decision-making on issues affecting the ocean, the general environment, governance, and other issues in society and the world at large.

Considering my participation in the One Ocean Youth Panel, one may ask, “So, what’s next?” I do have some action plans that I’m excited to begin working on to enable me to contribute significantly towards ensuring that we achieve the ocean that we desire. One of the plans which I will be executing is ocean literacy. I will be educating people about the importance of the ocean and its impact on our daily lives. Another action plan I have is community engagement. I plan to achieve this by collaborating with local communities, NGOs, and businesses to trigger sustained action around beach cleanups and conservation efforts.

Media and communications activities are part of my action plans. These activities will help me in sharing ocean-related news, research, and personal experiences on social media to promote education and advocacy around ocean protection.

I also have a plan to engender ocean stewardship by promoting sustainable ocean practices and exploring opportunities for joint projects with fellow panellists.

My participation in the One Ocean Youth Panel of the 2024 One Ocean Week was a life-changing experience that not only deepened my understanding of ocean conservation but also instilled in me a sense of purpose and belonging. I also had the privilege of sharing some challenges my community faces in relation to the ocean at one of the panel sessions. Being part of a community that shares a passion for ocean advocacy has energised me to continue learning, growing, and taking action.

I am committed to translating my learning from the panel into tangible actions and inspiring others to join the movement.

Together, we can protect our oceans for future generations!

[Titilope Ajimuda (Titi, for short) is a youth from Makoko, a fishing settlement located in Yaba Local Government Area, Lagos State, challenged by dredging and land reclamation activities and threats of displacement.]
The Annual General Strategy Meeting (AGSM) of the Africa Climate Justice Collective (ACJC) for 2024 was held in Yaounde, Cameroon, from 16 to 19 March. It was hosted by the Green Development Advocate (GDA) to enable members to reflect on ACJC’s achievements in the past year and brainstorm on how to refine strategies for greater achievement in the new calendar year. Participants hoped that, among other things, the meeting would avail the Collective the opportunity to develop a multiyear strategy and streamline ways in which the convenors will effectively work together, seek out ways to pull resources for women-focused climate actions, brainstorm on continent-wide challenges, and review and renew commitments to the ACJC.

Reflections on the background and vision of the ACJC showed that the Collective is very clear on the kind of change it seeks, and that is “change driven from below,” Sam Hargreaves stated. Part of the rationale behind the formation of the ACJC was to address the missing link discovered in the climate justice movement and negotiations at the multilateral spaces, Trusha Reddy noted. According to Nnimmo Bassey, the justice component was missing in all the discussions on climate change in Africa. He believed that the meeting would be an avenue for all to amplify the demand that fossils be left in the ground and climate debt be paid, among other key demands. Among the highlights of the meeting was the presentation on ‘Owning the ACJC Vocabulary,’ where Babawale Obayanju advocated for ACJC’s operational definitions of such concepts as colonialism, coloniality, neocolonialism, capitalism, extractivism, climate change, climate justice, inequality, justice, nature-based solution, food sovereignty, Net Zero, and climate debt. He suggested that the conceptualisations of these terms be rooted in the ACJC principles and be popularized by being used in ACJC’s activities and publications. He noted that there is an urgent need for a clear definition of renewable energy in order to make it crystal clear what it entails. The interrogation of these and some other concepts continued in the session tagged ‘Ubuntu Café.’ The session dealt with concepts and issues including real solutions vs false solutions, as well as energy politics in Africa, gas, green hydrogen, green minerals and metals, and climate debt – climate finance, loss and damage, Green Climate Funds (GCF), reparation and International
Financial Institutions (IFIs), food crisis and sovereignty, gender justice, community resilience and people power, and green extractivism in Africa.

It was noted that extractivism is an idea that originated from Latin America and is used to explain the magnitude of what is extracted mostly from the global South for markets in the global North. It is not about extracting resources for Africa's own needs but for the growth of the global North. The emerging green extractivism is poised for the plunder of resources but is painted as a solution to the climate crisis.

There were also discussions around the need to support convener groups around the Congo Basin, consisting of Cameroon, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea and Gabon, which is facing existential threats (e.g., displacement, pollution, and biodiversity loss) from the exploitation of the Basin.

Another well-debated issue was ACJC's non-participation at the Conference of Parties (COP). Suggestions were made that even if ACJC does not attend the COP, there needs to be structures to support convenors that attend the COP. It was also mentioned that events/programmes like the Africa Climate Week, United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA), the African Ministerial Conference on the Environment (AMCEN), Counter-COP, Southern Africa Green Hydrogen Summit, African Peoples Climate Assembly, Convention on Biological Diversity Conference of Parties (CBD COP), Global Day of Action, Plastic Treaty (Intergovernmental Negotiation Committee – 4th session in Canada) be explored by the ACJC and used to make a statement and share its declaration for use during advocacy works.

The Counter-COP was discussed, and suggestions were made about the need for the ACJC to consider partnerships that will help the space gain more recognition and command more participation and credibility so that it becomes a great alternative to the COP. There were presentations showing the importance of mental health and wellness in activism.

The meeting gave participants the room to suggest key themes and campaigns for the year as well as the vital activities and planning for Political Ecology School, African People's Counter COP 2024, Working Groups and subregional meetings. Suggested themes included: transition to a just society (just transition/renewable energy, dirty energy/plastics, false solution/green extractives), climate debt, food crisis/sovereignty and Congo Basin.

The strategy meeting ended with field visits to two communities in the Batchenga region, which was negatively impacted by the damming of the Sanaga River for the Nachtigal Dam.

The first community was Ndji, a predominantly fishing and farming community that now bedevilled by the impacts of the Nachtigal Hydro Power Company (NHPC) Dam project. His Majesty, Chief Ekoudi Ahana Joseph, leader of the...
community, who informed the visitors that the project started on 19 March 2019 and is currently at 12% completion, narrated the impact of the project thus:

“We used to live on fishing, farming, and artisanal sand mining as well as the associated value chain. But with [the] advent of the dam project, our fishing, farming, and sand mining have been gravely impacted.”

Another community member shared:

“We were seen as rich people before the dam project started. We used to get up to 15,000 CFA a day from fishing and other livelihood sources here. The dam has made us poor to the extent that we can no longer feed. They have told us to stay away from the water which used to be our fishing ground.”

A community woman also lamented bitterly about the project:

“Before the project came, we used to live well. When the men came back from fishing, we, the women, bought the fishes, processed, sold them, and used some to make our meals. Farming used to be very profitable and productive. Things have really gone bad. We did not have any experience of stealing in this community. But now stealing is common because people are hungry. Our girls have now turned prostitutes. Please, we need help!”

A fisher spoke of the false promises made to the people:

“We were told that the project will put everlasting smiles on our faces and told not to fish in the Sanaga River for three years. We had no option but to obey because we do not have the powers to stop them. After three years [had] passed, the hydroelectric company said they will pay 1.5 million CFA to each fisher, 800 CFA to sand miners, and 4 million CFA to quarry owners. They came and said that the money will be for only those registered. So, so many people did not get the money. This is brewing problems as a lot of people were omitted. We have been abandoned!

The community people also lamented that NHPC had taken a vast expanse of farmland to build residential quarters for their workers.

The second community visited was Nachtigal, where artisanal sand miners expressed frustration over the dam as it has given rise to the siltation of their waters and is hindering them from getting the sand they used to. They showed their disappointment with their exclusion from the compensation.

A local food seller summed up the situation by saying that the dam was named after their village, Nachtigal, but that the village has lost its life and livelihoods as a result of the dam work.
Books You Should Read

Being Anti-Colonial by Jayan Nayar

Being Anti-Colonial presents a profound critique of the contemporary engagements with ‘decolonial theory’ and the popular discourse of ‘decolonisation.’ This inspiring work argues that much of the current discourse within critical theory tends to overlook the intricate, essentially praxiological underpinnings of the anti-colonial struggle, thereby comfortably situating itself within the post-colonial status quo.

Being Anti-Colonial serves as a radical call to authentically re-engage with the anti-colonial ethos, emphasising the necessity to confront the enduring architectures of coloniality that define our present, as well as shape our present. Distinctly divided into two parts, the book primarily elucidates the conceptual groundwork to reconceptualise the notion of ‘anti-colonial’ as a philosophical stance deeply entwined with the fabric of the global (post)colonial reality. Through meticulously argued philosophical foundations, Nayar underscores the (post)colonial present as a state of ‘resettlement’, where the architecture of post-colonial world-making loses sight of its colonial matrices. Being Anti-Colonial is both an invitation and a challenge to the academic community to critically revisit and re-energize the conversation about coloniality.

Under-Education in Africa: From Colonialism to Neoliberalism by Karim Hirji

Under-Education in Africa: From Colonialism to Neoliberalism is a collection of essays on diverse aspects of educational systems in Africa. The essays were written over a period of four and a half decades from the point of view of an activist educator. With a focus on Tanzania, the essays cover education during the German colonial era, the days of Ujamaa socialism and the present neo-liberal times.

Themes explored in the book cover a wide array of issues in education, namely the social function of education, the impact of external dependency on education, practical versus academic education, democracy and violence in schools, the role of computers in education, the effect of privatisation on higher education, misrepresentation of educational history, effective and ineffective teaching approaches, reading strategies, the teaching of statistics to doctors, and student activism in education.

The author is a retired professor of medical statistics who has taught at colleges and universities in Tanzania and at universities in the USA and Norway.
Heroes of the African Revolution: Colouring Book by Adrianne Williams, United African Diaspora

This colouring book aims to expose African children to their authentic history. Malcolm X told us decades ago that we had to take responsibility for our children’s education because he understood that our people had been intentionally robbed of their true history through the instrumentality of Western education.

We can no longer rely on most Western-oriented institutions in postcolonial Africa to educate our children, so we must take it upon ourselves to equip our children with the truth so that they can bring a positive contribution to our people’s struggle for justice and freedom. This book highlights some of the key figures in the struggle to achieve Pan-Africanism, which is the total liberation and unification of Africa. All of the brave women and men featured in this book were Pan-Africanists. They understood that people of African descent throughout the world faced the similar challenges and, therefore, had to unite in order to overcome them.

We hope this book can inspire the next generation of African children to orientate them towards Pan-Africanism, equipping them to join the struggle to liberate and unite Africa.

UPCOMING ACTIVITIES

- Workshop with Judiciary on Biosafety — 29 July 2024
- National Conference on GMOs and Biosafety — 31 July 2024
- Community Training Sessions on Use of Songs, Art, and Drama to Build Resistance — July 2024
- Assessment of Oil Pollution in Okoro Utip and Eteo Communities — July/August 2024
- SoE on Recovering Oil Sacrifice Zones coming up on 1-2 August 2024
- Oilwatch International Conference and Annual General Assembly — 18 to 25 August 2024
- FishNet Alliance General Assembly — 22 August 2024
- Rally against GMOs — August 2024
- Climate Justice, Creative Culture and Communities for Peace (CCC for Peace) — 26 August 26 to 2 September 2024
- National Seed/Food Fair — September 2024
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