

## INAUGURAL (2023) OLOIBIRI CONVERSATIONS - INSTITUTE OF NIGER DELTA STUDIES

Inaugural (2023) Oloibiri Conversations of the Institute of Niger Delta Studies (of the Niger Delta University, Bayelsa State) on the Theme “Reassessing the Environmental Costs to the Niger Delta of Oil and Gas Exploration in Nigeria: The Santa Barbara Experience”

Chairman’s Opening Address, By INIRUO WILLS

ECOCIDE IN THE DELTA: WAKE UP, NIGER DELTA GOVERNORS AND LEADERS!

Let us have a frank conversation. I start on a note of hope and responsibility. Imagine that Niger Delta Governors realized our environment is of economic importance and a core of their governance mission.

Imagine that they decided to apply their constitutional powers and official resources to stop the Promethean floods of petroleum pollution that have condemned an entire exquisite delta as the worst and longest abused physical environment across human history and global geography. Just imagine. Responsibility!

Well, neither they nor their predecessors bothered. They are in good company. Except for Amina Mohammed, now a Deputy Secretary General of the UN, hardly any Nigerian Minister of Environment or of Petroleum has treated the theme of today’s conversation, the oil-borne decimation of the world’s third largest delta, as more than an irritation. Most of the Ministers of Petroleum, including the last four, who by token of that office have overseen the ecocide in the Delta, are natives of the region. Responsibility!

If however the current Governors, Douye Diri of Bayelsa, Ifeanyi Okowa of Delta, Nyesom Wike of Rivers and Emmanuel Udom of

Akwa Ibom, and the Minister of Petroleum, Chief Timipre Sylva (himself one of the predecessor Governors of Niger Delta states), along with the new Managing Director of Niger Delta Development Commission - NDDC - decide even at this 11th hour of the present political administrations to start, just start, the process of cleaning up the notorious mess, they can light a candle that will keep their names aglow for ages. Hope!

Our forebears could not have believed that on the 15th of January 1956 when crude oil was finally discovered in commercially viable quantity in then Oloibiri Province in present day Bayelsa State, it was to begin an existential threat to their communities and social fabric. That was 67 years yesterday. Only three years short of 70 years, almost every authority that should stop the increasing madness either is too inept or doesn't give two hoots and is often in cahoots with the operators mindlessly poisoning our ecosystem and the network of oil thieves that is competing with the official system of pillaging and pollution.

This initiative of the Institute of Niger Delta Studies (INDS) is therefore both seminal on an otherwise cliché topic and potentially momentous. To change the lack of progress from the last sixty something years, we must radically reframe how we perceive and propagate agency, culpability and cure for the pathology at hand.

On the 1st of November 2021, as the annual UN Climate Change jamboree (COP 26 then) was settling down in Glasgow to start business, one of the hydrocarbon reservoirs in my Nembe homeland erupted furiously like a volcano. As if to mock the global talkfest, the Santa Barbara Oil Well 1 generously disgorged oil and gas like a hyperbolic barrel of toxic champagne into the unsuspecting habitat for the full duration of Glasgow. Denied the deserved global attention, our local climate catastrophe angrily went on for 39 days, sputtering to a stop on 8th December.

For the first three weeks of that extended emergency, no notable federal or state regulator or high political officer bothered to visit Ground Zero. In stark contrast, when Deepwater Horizon blew out in the United States, of similar magnitude to Nembe's Santa Barbara (except for the number of fatalities), then President Barrack Obama visited the sites of interest four times between the incident and the remediation process that he enforced with his executive authority. Not counting Governors, Ministers (Secretaries), industry regulators, Naval Commanders, Mayors and first responders that promptly swung into action, let alone the \$20 billion President Obama ordered the spillers to immediately deposit towards cleanup and compensation costs. Those costs, including civil and criminal fines till date, are at least as plenty in billions of dollars as the number of years since commercial oil was struck in Nigeria: 67. Of course, the then CEO of the operator, BP, was forced to resign. Responsibility!

Though there is no official report of human casualties from Santa Barbara, at least one infant (known as Master Longlife) is unofficially alleged to have died from the gas-charged air quality in surrounding communities. It may be worthy for relevant authorities, CSOs and media to critically revisit the short life of Master Longlife.

One year after the Santa Barbara disaster, cleanup has not commenced. Besides a belated pedestrian look at the site by the regulators, there has been absolutely no forensic or clinical investigation of the explosion. For most of the 39 days, the incumbent Director-General of NOSDRA (National Oil Spill Detection and Response Agency), Mr Idris Musa, was either busy prattling on television in far away Abuja or castigating host communities for vandalization of production facilities. In almost 20 years of NOSDRA's existence, the agency's inept leaderships have woefully failed to conduct mere post spill impact assessments, one of their express statutory duties, in over 98% of the thousands of spills occurring in the Niger Delta every year. DG Idris Musa has till date abdicated his statutory obligation to commission an independent impact

assessment of the 2021 Santa Barbara disaster. And nobody is questioning his continued stay in an office he has proven incapable of discharging, a gross dereliction of duty that is dangerously inimical to the health, lives and livelihoods of countless host communities. Responsibility Nigerian style!

In Ikarama Community in Bayelsa, pools of spilled oil have been discovered underground in sites that were certified by Musa's NOSDRA, Nigeria's environmental regulator, to have been cleaned up, a national embarrassment in waiting. In Brass Island, another regulatory agency has failed to ensure an independent assessment of the impact of about 50 (fifty) years of daily contaminant discharge but, in shocking self-indictment, is collecting fines from the operator after the community officially protested the malfeasance which could only go on because that regulator neglected to enforce standards for over thirty years. In the Koluama area, offshore Bayelsa State, in another disaster on the scale of the US Deep Water/Macondo case, the KS Endeavour rig exploded while working exploration projects for which there was reportedly no prior or proper Environmental Impact Assessment. Only in Nigeria is such a scandal possible.

A good part of Okrika and Alesa Eleme around the Port Harcourt Refinery is soaked in toxic oil waste. Polobubo (Tsekelewu) Community in Delta State has been suffocating under a level of ecological alteration from oil operations that can happen only where neither state nor federal governments exist. A giant gas flare has been roasting the populace of Gbarain and Ekpetiama communities, and a constellation of smaller gas flares wreaks the same havoc on rural dwellers in Idu Community in Rivers State.

By far the biggest shock though is the complete lack of urgency and gravitas in how Niger Delta Governors, political leaders and some community chieftains treat this existential emergency.

Four years ago, Bayelsa State Government then under Governor Seriake Dickson constituted a team of eminent local and international experts into the Bayelsa State Oil and Environmental Commission (BSOEC), the Bishop John Sentamu Commission, going by its Chairman's name. They must have done a vast amount of work but, for inexplicable reasons, the Bayelsa State Government appears non-chalant about getting the panel to release its looong-awaited report.

Then the Niger Delta Development Commision has so far dodged the first reason for which it was created, the only reason explicitly captured for emphasis in the long title of its enabling Act, i.e. "to tackle the ecological problems" of the Niger Delta.

The other elephant in the room is the local saboteurs, the Judases and Esaus who habitually sell out their communities' salvation and birthrights for any piece of silver or mess of pottage for themselves. At the traditional leadership level, why are our kings not making history again in defence of their ecological domains since after the King Kokos, Jajas, Nanas and Ovarenwens of over a century ago? Distinguished in this context as a positive example is His Royal Majesty, King Bubaraye Dakolo, in attendance at this event, who along with Nigeria's leading environmental activist, our keynote speaker today, Reverend Nnimmo Bassey, led a civil society team to the Santa Barbara oil and gas eruption in order to amplify public attention to it. King Dakolo's powerful book "The Riddle of the Oil Thief" would be an instructive prescription for subsequent iterations of the Oloibiri Conversations.

The Ogonis paid too high a cost in human casualties and enforced a social embargo on oil production in their aboriginal land unless their contaminated terrain and estuaries are cleaned up. So Nigeria agreed to embark on the Ogoni clean up, largely spurred on by UNEP. The rest of the Niger Delta population should not have to pay the same cost and enforce the same self-help for justice to be done.

## SO WHAT TO DO?

Let me table a few recommendations that may have silver bullet potentials:

1. Duty and responsibility must be personalized: the persons who are governors, ministers, senators, assembly men, regulators, Obis, Amanyabos, and INC (Ijaw National Congress) or Urhobo Progress Union Presidents should stand up for their people and ACT, not just talk, for environmental justice and the future socioeconomic sustainability of our homelands.

2. Starting with self-responsibility at community levels, it is necessary to induce a strongly networked buildup of community civil society or civic responsibility structures for fostering and if needs be pursuing the enforcement of transparency and accountability. For example, community whistle blowing programmes can cause cultural climate change for good. 29th January, two weeks hence, will be the 128th anniversary of the Akassa Raid, a.k.a. Nembe-British War or “Beke You mi”, led by the Nembe Royalties at the time. This Institute may enrich its town-gown portfolio with however modest a collaborative reflection that day on the need to revive the integrity of community interest.

3. Most urgently, President Muhammadu Buhari, Ministers Sylva(Petroleum Resources), Okon Umana (Niger Delta Affairs), Sharon Ikeazor (having served in both Environment and Niger Delta Affairs) and Mohammed Abdullahi (Environment), our Niger Delta Governors, and our brand new Managing Director of NDDC in collaboration with HYPREP should inaugurate a Niger Delta Cleanup Programme, starting with a credible independent environmental assessment to commence before 31st March 2023. Concurrently, let us determine to engage the four leading presidential candidates to

covenant publicly to enact on 29th May 2023 a Niger Delta Cleanup Programme as their inaugural commitment to the region.

4. Finally, the 2023 general elections and the later 2023 Bayelsa governorship elections present us with a possible inflection point to vote only presidential, governorship, senatorial or assembly candidates who demonstrate a clear will to take decisive action to S.T.O.P: Stop The Oil Pollution!

5. The test of whether this inaugural Oloibiri Conversation will end up in a typical dud Nigerian communique or translate to concrete policy actions and timely visible results lies in how civil society, the environmental justice movement, academia like the INDS, media, and professional organizations like the Nigerian Bar Association (which has been asleep on the Niger Delta front) can ORGANIZE and take every lawful action necessary to encourage and cause leaders and public authorities to do their duty. Even the creative sector, our audacious Nollywood et al are not left out in this clarion call. On which note I encourage us all to look out for the forthcoming movie of the Niger Delta actress, Ibinabo Fiberesima, entitled “Amanyano: The Eagle King”, around a thematically related plot.

6. I conclude with a lyric from one of my favourite artistes, Mariah Carey: “Hope is frail, but hard to kill.” Let us all work to actualize hope.

Thanks for your attention and anticipated action. Let the Oloibiri Conversations commence!