

PIB: PULLING TOGETHER FOR ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

Text of an address delivered by the executive director of Spaces for Change, Victoria Ibezim-Ohaeri at the two-day conference, PIB: *PULLING TOGETHER FOR ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE* held in Eket, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria

Oil spills in the oil-rich Niger-Delta have attracted global attention. Because of increased dependence of the Nigerian government on oil revenues and imported petroleum which involves corresponding exploration, transportation and handling of oils, it can be expected that accidental oil spills of considerable magnitude will continue to occur. The Niger Delta region, being the central point of oil exploration and production in Nigeria is gravely affected by exploration activities in which the traditional means of subsistence, farming and fishing in the creeks, streams and mangroves are adversely affected by constant oil spills, gas flares, blow-outs and leaks, with spiraling effects on public health, soil productivity, aquatic life and the environment.

Spaces for Change's onsite observation from rivers, streams and beaches visited in Eket, Esit-Eket and Ibeno villages in Akwa Ibom State show that recurring oil spills have devastatingly contaminated water and local food sources, destroying fisher folk and aquatic life. Our findings further establish that this scenario is replicated across 9 local government areas where hundreds of thousands of indigenous populations live. Between August 13 and December 16, 2012, no less than 10 incidents of massive oil spills have been recorded, resulting in adverse environmental impacts on the ecosystem and loss of traditional livelihoods.

Our contact with, and interviews with the indigenous people living and operating businesses in and around the affected areas reveal surging local discontent fuelled by a range of issues such as recurrent mystery spills, oil companies' non-disclosure of the actual volumes spilled, unpaid compensation, non-transparent negotiation methods and widespread community exclusion in many aspects of industry dealings. To compound the situation, comprehensive clean-up and remediation of various sites of oil spills have not taken place several months after the spills occurred. Overwhelming evidence shows that the volatile situation in the Niger Delta is in large part, attributable to the large-scale environmental degradation linked to weakly-regulated oil exploratory and production activities, which continue to increase indigenous communities' vulnerability to food shortages, health hazards, loss of land and livelihood resources, forced migration, unemployment and so forth.

Spaces for Change (S4C) has worked closely with Niger Delta communities affected by various natural and man-made environmental hazards, especially oil pollution, to find sustainable ways to meet their social, economic, and cultural needs and to improve the quality of their lives. From Rivers to Bayelsa, Warri, Delta and Cross River States, we have mobilized grassroot participation in oil policy development; we have campaigned vigorously for improved governance of the environment; and for increased respect for community rights to benefit from natural resources within the context and framework of Nigeria's latest oil regime, the Petroleum Industry Bill (PIB). The reform bill recognizes that oil operations (including seismic operations, mining, oil

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spill resulting from equipment failure, human error, corrosion etc) can cause damage to private property rights, the natural vegetation and the human habitat, and therefore, contains robust preventive and remedial provisions in event of breach.

In April 2013, Spaces for Change launched a report, The **PIB Resource Handbook: An Analysis of the Petroleum Industry Bill's Provision on Community Participation and the Environment**. The Handbook contains a detailed analysis of the PIB provisions relating to community participation and the environment. The Handbook forms part of a broader organizational strategy to promote awareness of the PIB, while expanding access to reliable energy-focused data and resources for building the capacity of industry stakeholders and ordinary citizens to monitor and engage meaningfully in the PIB passage architecture. Beyond analyzing and critically reviewing specific provisions of the PIB that could potentially undermine community participation and environment protection, the Handbook evaluates their coherence with global best practices and standards on environmental sustainability and participatory development.

S4C's strategic policy advocacy and high-level engagement with legislators, policy makers, regulators, state governments, oil companies and their host-communities show that oil and gas stakeholders want better industry regulation and mechanisms that guarantee safer and non-disruptive oil operations. On that premise, we are intensifying the campaign to get everyone involved in the development of effective policies to regulate the industry and increase stronger protection for communities and the environment.

Today's conference will lay the foundation for productive engagement and amongst a broad range of agents – advocates, representatives of the oil and gas industry, policymakers, industry regulators, non-governmental organizations, oil producing communities, media, academia and other stakeholders – towards fleshing out approaches that allow collaborative problem-solving to succeed. Among other objectives, the roundtable aims to forge mutuality in the exploration of solutions for addressing the range of community concerns in Akwa Ibom State and environmental conditions that pose risks to national, regional, and global security and stability. Stakeholders will also begin the necessary conversation around building sustainable consensus and joint action towards transforming local agitations into opportunities for peaceful change, environmental justice and corporate accountability.

Established in May 2011, Spaces for Change (S4C) is a non-profit, human rights organization working to infuse human rights in social and economic decision-making processes in Nigeria. Mainly through research, policy analysis, community action and public advocacy, the organization works to increase public (youth and community) participation in social and economic development, and also help public authorities and corporate entities to put a human rights approach at the heart of their decision-making.

We welcome all participants who have travelled from communities far and wide - Mbo, Eket, Ona, Ibeno, Ikot Abasi, Esit-Eket, Ikot Ekpene, Nsit Ubium and across the Niger Delta - to join in the conversation. We are optimistic that our deliberations will

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help increase understanding of the PIB provisions on the environment, and increase stakeholders' capacity to play their unique roles in the shared struggle for environmental justice and social responsibility.