



Observations From Nigeria

By Mohan Natarajan

August 2007

In early August, the West African board met to discuss grant-making strategy and plans for 2008. The meeting was held in Warri, Nigeria, deep in the heart of Nigeria's oil country, and was attended by Abdulai Darimani, Nnimmo Bassey, and Mohan Natarajan. Another advisor, Dembele Souleymane, who resides in Bamako, was not able to attend.

Abdulai is the Environment Program Officer and Head of the Environment Unit at the Africa Secretariat of the Third World Network in Accra, Ghana. Abdulai's experience in dealing with the extractive industry has been a great asset in achieving the goals of the West Africa board.

Nnimmo is a well known figure in the global effort to reduce world dependence on fossil fuels. Nnimmo, a founding member of the West African board and the Executive Director of Environmental Rights Action (ERA), focuses on issues related to the oil industry in the Niger Delta.

Mohan is the Director of Finance for Greengrants and has worked for the organization since 2002.

The board was also a part of an inaugural gathering of groups working on extractive industries in West Africa. Mohan documented his experiences during these few days and included observations from Nnimmo and Abdulai in his reflections:

Wednesday, August 1

Nnimmo, Abdulai, and I left our hotel in Lagos for a short flight to Benin City and then an hour car drive to Warri, the capital of Delta State. Delta State is the oil capital of Nigeria, where corruption and crime are rampant. As a result, police check points occur every few miles and bribing is commonplace. During our drive I saw many cars detained by police. Each time we saw a car pulled to the side, either Nnimmo or Abdulai would comment, "They must not have enough bribe money."



Nnimmo, Mohan, Abdulai and Evelyn Bassey

We arrived in Warri around 3:00 p.m. and checked into The Wellington Hotel. The Wellington is located next door to the Petroleum Institute of Warri. The proximity to the Institute provided us the luxury of staying at one of the best hotels in Warri!

After lunch Nnimmo, Abdulai, and I met to discuss the issues related to the West African board. We discussed the addition of a new advisor in Burkina Faso and the involvement of the West African board in the Greengrants' three-year planning process. Much of the meeting was dedicated to the current state of civil society in West Africa and Greengrants' place in addressing the issues related to the extractive industries.

For quite some time, Greengrants advisors have discussed the need to fund travel in order to network within in their respective geographic region. Given the large area covered by the West African board (over 15 countries), Nnimmo and Abdulai echoed this need and we discussed establishing a travel stipend in 2008.

Thursday, August 2

Today was the core of our three-day meeting. It began with the first meeting of the Host Communities Network (HoCon). The network is made up of about 20 groups who are working on mining, oil and gas, and industrial forestry issues—all have created lasting impacts on the landscape and many of the communities of West Africa. Even the name—Host Communities Network—says so much as it seeks to reestablish the balance of power between industry and host communities. The core of HoCon's work is to provide a structure for community-based organizations to meet, share ideas and experience, and strategize for future collaborative action.



Paul Ohonbamu and the panel

This past January, Greengrants provided a small grant to the group, providing funding for travel to Nairobi for the World Social Forum. Greengrants provided funding for this kick-off meeting and will be providing an infrastructure grant to the organization in the latter part of 2007.

The meeting with HoCon was organized as a sort of parliamentary meeting. The attendees of the meeting included many Greengrants grantees, plus local groups interested in the HoCon's mission. Speakers at the meeting included:

- Mr. Paul Ohonbamu, the minority leader of the Edo State House of Assembly
- Nurudeen Ogbara Esq., Executive Director of the Citizens Assistance Centre
- Nnimmo Abdulai and me

Mr. Ohonbamu was crucial to the spirit and excitement at HoCon. With his senior status in the state government, Nnimmo knew he would excite the attendees and legitimize the new organization. Other notable attendees included a senior journalist for The Guardian—Lagos and a television reporter from a local station.

During the course of the meeting, numerous grantees presented their work to the group. Two of these grantees were the Ijaw Mothers for Warri and the Niger Delta Women for Justice. These groups are run by and focused on women. Given the deep lines of male dominance in West Africa, the women's presence was significant.

The fervor among attendees against multinational oil companies was very clear: people feel left behind, cheated, and hurt. The Nigerian National Petroleum Company (NNPC), in conjunction with the oil industry, has displaced these communities through a strategy of extreme pollution and harassment. Questions asked included, "How do we fight back?" and "Even if we approach lawyers they never seem to understand the laws or care about us." The discussion lasted approximately four hours, and during this time local groups were given specific information regarding their legal rights and recourse.

After the HoCon meeting, Abdulai and Nnimmo had organized a meeting with many of our grantees in the Warri area. The groups ranged from legal assistance organizations to mothers organizing, writing, and distributing pamphlets, to air and soil sampling groups. Abdulai, Nnimmo, and I prefaced the roundtable discussion by stating this was not



Greengrants grantee forum participants

a formal presentation of their work. We wanted them to feel comfortable and talk openly about their respective groups.

Their message was clear: “We feel we are losing the struggle and we need help.” Nnimmo was particularly impressed by the fact that the groups were much more organized and professional than four years ago. He was also excited by their level of commitment. After the grantee forum the three of us met to finish the final funding round for 2007 and review the day’s events.

Warri is a highly volatile place. The land is laden with oil and natural gas. Big oil is entrenched in this area and I can sense the anger local people have about their quality of life in the face of all the profits accruing to the oil companies. This has created a very dangerous place for foreigners. I was accompanied every moment of my stay and I was constantly reminded that I have hostage value.

Friday, August 4

We went on a site visit today to a riverbank village that lost its source of means and food as a result of a fire. The Ubeji community is located in Warri and downstream from an NNPC refinery, which is jointly run with Shell Oil. A few weeks ago the refinery had a major spill and created a 5 kilometer oil slick in the local river. No cleanup activities ensued, and within a few days the river caught fire.



Creek surrounding Ubeji Community

Local community leaders called the central government's emergency relief organization and reported the fire to the refinery. For three days, no action was taken and now the river is heavily polluted, killing or contaminating the fish stock. The mangrove forest banking the river has been lost, which has caused heavy erosion problems in this tropical forest. The stench from the polluted river still hung in the air and the murky water was a dark brown.

The community was devastated by the fire and felt they had no recourse to receive any restitution. Nnimmo asked the community leaders if they had attempted to receive any legal assistance. Members of the community confirmed that they had shunned all outside help. They felt attorneys would not work on their behalf and they did not trust the legal system. Without action, this community will not receive any compensation for losses.

Nnimmo committed to the elders of the village that ERA and Greengrants would assist them in their struggle, and would start by finding the right type of legal help.

While the story of this community is sad, I was hopeful as I left. For 20 years, Nnimmo has been working on building networks in the Niger Delta, and now, with this visit, the Ubeji community would hopefully become a part of the movement. I’m looking forward to see what happens next ...

To check out ERA go to:

<http://www.eraaction.org>

You can also read an article written about the Host Communities Network at:

http://www.guardiannewsngr.com/homes_property/article06/030907