

So dropped the first oil barrels in the Saloum Delta

(Ibrahima Thiam-RLS Program manager Climate justice)



Photo: RLS- a fisher community under river pollution in Nigeria

June 11th 2024 will remain ingrained in modern Senegalese collective memory. On this landmark day, the young republic and land of the poet-president Leopold Sédar Senghor celebrated the production of the first barrel of oil in the Sangomar oilfield. The Sangomar offshore well is located in deep waters 100 km south of Dakar and contains both oil and gas. The Managing Director of the state-owned oil company **PETROSEN** described this day as marking a new era for the industry, the economy and the people of Senegal. He also recalled that Senegal holds an 18% stake in the project.

So became Senegal an oil producer with a production of one hundred thousand barrels per dayⁱ.

June 20th and 22nd June 2024 are also memorable dates in Nigeria's modern history because civil society organizations, community leaders and affected communities of the Niger Delta, under the leadership of Health of Mother Earth Foundation (HOMEF), met in Abuja to present both the ***Niger Delta Manifesto For Socio Ecological Justice*** and the *Nigeria socio alternatives convergence*. The manifesto presents the grim balance sheet of seven decades (1956 and 2024) of oil production in the Niger Delta and a calls for social and ecological justice.

Two countries different but with a similar destiny: their oil exploitation started in their deltas: Niger Delta for Nigeria and Saloum Delta for Senegal. We know what oil production has meant for Nigeria: a legacy of pollution, dispossession, summary killings, and also the emergence of many oligarchs in faraway places. Can Senegal go a different route from Nigeria? Can the offshore oil exploitation escape the Nigerian tragedy? If the Saloum Delta looked like the Niger Delta 50 years ago, will it be looking the Niger Delta in 50 years?

I. THE OIL LEGACY IN THE NIGER DELTA: BETWEEN PAIN AND POLLUTION

Africa's hydrocarbons exploitation goes to the 1950s starting with Algeria, Gabon and Congo, followed by Angola, Nigeria and Libya in the 1960s. Nigeria is still leading in Africa by 1,388 barrels per day and stands as

the 15th world oil producerⁱⁱ. Algeria follows with 0.97 million barrels per day, Angola with 1.1 million barrels per day, Libya with 1.15 million barrels per day and Nigeria with 1.18 million barrels per dayⁱⁱⁱ. Senegal joined the African oil producer with 100,000 barrels per day, a small number compared to the continental giants.

1. The environmental degradation

Although the exploitation of Africa's resources had raised many hopes of better living standards for all from the sixties, most countries have never reaped any significant positive developmental rewards^{iv}.

The history of oil production in Africa particularly in Nigeria is colored with a lot of pain and suffering, but also pollution when we consider the Niger Delta region where oil has been exploited for more than fifty years. When we consider the management of the oil revenue, the human rights issues, the conflicts, the destruction of livelihoods, impacts on the fishing sector and the pollution it caused, it is hard to say that oil in Nigeria has contributed to improvements in the living standards of the people.

The environmental disaster in Niger Delta led the activist Mbachu to say that *it is one of the most polluted spots on the planet earth*^v. This is due to the oil spills cutting across nine states, harbours, rivers and estuaries, including significant destruction to Africa's largest mangrove forest ecosystem. Between 2011 and 2022, there were 10,463 spill incidents in the Niger Delta, releasing a combined 507,135 barrels of oil into the environment.

In 2008, for example, leaks from Shell's Trans-Niger pipeline spilled about 600,000 barrels of oil into the earth there^{vi}. Shell often describes the cause of the oil spill as sabotage. On Dec 31, 2023, Shell declared an estimated spill volume of 15 billion barrels^{vii} across the 20" Old Kolocreek - Rumuekpe Pipeline at Okporowo across 53 years and in the Niger Delta.

One of the environmental problems linked to crude oil exploitation in the Niger Delta is Gas flaring. It consists of burning natural gas and petroleum hydrocarbons in flare stacks by the companies in oil fields while operating. 2.5 billion cubic feet (or 70%) valued at about \$2.5 billion is burnt off in gas flares^{viii}. 40 years after flaring started, the fires still burn unabated. While gas flaring is seen as the most common source of global warming through its emissions of carbon monoxide (CO), nitrogen (II) oxide (NO) and methane (CH₄)^{ix}, in Nigeria no alternatives have been sought by the oil companies – because it is just cheaper to burn the gas, the wellbeing of local people and the local environment be damned.

2. The repressive answer to communities struggles

"We thought it was oil but it was blood" Nnimmo Bassey

Violence has reigned over two decades in the 27,000 square miles Niger Delta region. Communities living around felt as the first victims of economic and environmental injustice. It was during the 1980s that several indigenous tribal groups raised concerns about the environmental consequences of the oil exploitation by international oil companies. The communities of the Ogoni, the Ijaws, the *Itserikis*, the *Urhobos*, the *Isikos*, the *Liages*, the *Ikwerres*, the *Ekpeyes* and the *Ogulgahas* have complained repeatedly against the prosperity of these oil companies at their expense. Starting with protests, acts of civil disobedience and minor acts of sabotage, the movement was radicalized by the execution of the Ogoni environmental activist Ken Saro-Wiwa on November 10, 1995 in Port Harcourt by the Nigerian military regime. The conflict escalated and rebel groups started kidnappings for money, stealing oil from pipelines and selling it locally or on the world market.

Several groups such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), Ijaws-based Federated Niger Delta Ijaw Communities (FNDIC), the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force, (NDPVF), the Egbesu Boys of Africa (EBA) and the Niger Delta Volunteer Force (NDVF) emerged to fight for a greater share of oil wealth. A number of communities, including the Ijaws are fighting for self-determination in addition to the demands for a greater share of the regions oil resources^x. Another high-profile case involving Nnamdi Kanu's Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) remains in court to this day.

3. The power of oil money

The Nigerian economy is largely dominated by oil. In 2019, 84% of government's export earnings were made up by oil and gas^{xi}. With the easy money of the 1970s oil boom, corruption cases took another scale in form of fraud, overbilling of contracts and theft of crude oil with the complicity of agents from the national oil company, the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation^{xii} (NNPC). In his book "*Corruption in Nigeria*", Mouhammed Saliou attributed the oil wealth to be one of the main causes of the pervasiveness of rent-seeking activities and corruption. The oil boom of the 1970s is seen as responsible for the 'Dutch Disease'^{xiii} syndrome in Nigeria, which contracted the agricultural sector and the appreciation of the real exchange rate^{xiv}.

Oil in Nigeria has certainly raised the country to the first economy among the West African states but it has led to a lot of divisions, frustration and divisions in the country. The primary sector composed of fishery and agriculture has suffered terribly with oil production. Between 2018 and 2022, Nigeria recorded trade deficit worth N4.92 trillion^{xv} largely due to food imports, food that Nigeria can produce.

//.T 1. Senegal's SANGOMAR DILEMMA: BETWEEN OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES?

The Saloum Delta is a UNESCO world heritage site. It is located in central-western Senegal between the cities of Joal-Fadiouth to the North, the Republic of the Gambia to the South and the Atlantic Ocean to the West. This biosphere Reserve is part of the Saloum River Basin, which has two main branches, the Diomboss and the Bandiala. Like a reverse estuary, the delta is made up of 21 islets and mangrove-fringed channels. The total surface area is 334,000, of which 60,000 ha are mangrove swamp. The Reserve's flora contains at least 188 species. Eleven sites were declared *Classified Forests* in the 1930s, hosting 36 species of wild mammals, 114 species of fish and over 200 species of birds have been recorded^{xvi}.

The region offers sites with special legal status: the Saloum Delta National Park (PNDS); the classified Forests (Bétenti Islands, Saloum Islands, Keur Sambel, Vélor, Patako East and Patako South, Baria, Saboya, Sokone, Sangako, Djilor); the Community Nature Reserves (Missira, Néma Bah, Massarinko, Samé, Toubou Baria, Ndinderling Palmarin and Mbowen) and the Marine Protected Areas (Bamboung, Gandoul, Sangomar).

The Saloum Delta is also the third most important ornithological site in West Africa after the Banc d'Arguin (Mauritania) and the Djoudj (Senegal).

How can such a nature-blessed region be opened up to oil and gas exploitation threatening the whole biodiversity and the livelihood of one million people? Are we having here a second *yasuni*, when we compare the impacts on the communities?

It was in 2014 that the Sangomar (formerly SNE) field was discovered. The field contains associated and non-associated natural gas, with reserves of around 4 TCF (113 billion Nm³). In June 2021, the Senegalese

authorities approved the sale of Australian oil company FAR's 15% stake in the Sangomar oil project to its compatriot Woodside Energy. The following year, the Grand Tortue/Ahmeyin (GTA) natural gas field was discovered with the drilling of the Tortue-1 (Ahmeyin-1) well in Mauritania and the Guembeul-1 well in Senegal. The field contains around 20 TCF of natural gas, or 530 billion Nm³^{xvii}. British Petroleum and the American based company Kosmos are in partnership in both fields: Grand Tortue Ahmeyin (GTA) and the Yakaar Teranga hub.

Senegal does not intend to give up the fossil fuel projects; rather the country is hoping to radically transform its economy, its industrial fabric and therefore its prospects for the future with oil money^{xviii}. Where has that happened in Africa before?

While opening the oil and gas era, it is closing at the same time the long tradition of fishing activities and the whole value of chain concerned. Over 25 000 fishing boats are registered in Senegal. Fishing ensures the livelihood of 53,000 households directly and over 600 000 households indirectly. With an average of 450,000 tonnes of fish caught each year over the last 5 years, Senegal is the second largest fish producer in West Africa after Nigeria, which has an annual average of 530,000 tonnes. In 2021, fishing generated \$400 million in revenue for the country, representing 10.2% of exports^{xix}. The Saloum Delta is an economic hub with a high concentration of people with socio-economic activities such as agriculture, fishing, livestock farming and tourism.

The Environmental and social Impact Assessment made by the joint venture (Woodside, Cairn Energy, FAR Ltd and PETROSEN) poses the environmental challenges as follows^{xx}: disturbance of the seabed, underwater noise, physical presence of hips and underwater infrastructures, atmospheric emissions, waste production etc.

The Niger Delta experience created a psychosis around oil exploitation in Africa. Communities are also seduced by the prospects of sudden windfalls. However, the costs need to be weighed against the projected benefits. In the case of Saloum Delta, the local fishery-based economy and its multipliers (fishing activities, processing of sea products, eco-tourism) represent much more that oil can ever offer.

However, people have been blinded by the illusion of oil wealth. Can Senegal benefit from the oil exploiting in the Saloum Delta without paying the cost of social and environmental degradation? Only time will tell.

ⁱ [Sénégal : Démarrage de la production de pétrole au champ Sangomar \(aa.com.tr\)](#)

ⁱⁱ [OPEC : Nigeria](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ [Oil Market Report - July 2023 – Analysis - IEA](#)

^{iv} [Who is reaping the rewards from Africa's sub-soil resources? - Naturenews.africa](#)

^v [Nigeria Confronts the Toxic Legacy of 60 Years of Abundant Oil \(bloomberg.com\)](#)

^{vi} [How Shell's oil spills in the Niger Delta have devastated communities | openDemocracy](#)

^{vii} [2023 Oil Spill Incident Data | Shell Nigeria](#)

^{viii} [ssrn-4256491.pdf](#)

^{ix} [\(PDF\) IMPACT OF GAS FLARING ON CLIMATE CHANGE \(A CASE STUDY OF NIGER DELTA REGION OF NIGERIA\) \(researchgate.net\)](#)

^x [Armed Conflicts Report - Nigeria \(archive.org\)](#)

^{xi} [ssrn-4256491.pdf](#)

^{xii} [Oil Rent and Corruption: The Case of Nigeria \(ifri.org\)](#)

^{xiii} The dutch disease is often referred to the existing paradox when the discovery of natural resources results in a negative impact on the overall economy.

^{xiv} [Document-libre.pdf \(d1wqtxts1xzle7.cloudfront.net\)](#)

^{xv} [Govt efforts failing as food imports rise 122%, deficit hits N4.9trn - Vanguard News \(vanguardngr.com\)](#)

^{xvi} [SGP-Sénégal | Delta du Saloum \(sgpsenegal.org\)](#)

^{xvii} [Senegal -Oil & Gas \(trade.gov\)](#)

^{xviii} [Pour le Sénégal et la RDC, pas question de renoncer au pétrole et au gaz \(lemonde.fr\)](#)

^{xix} [Sénégal: la pêche traditionnelle, une source de richesse \(aa.com.tr\)](#)

^{xx} [developpement-du-champ-sne-phase-1-resume-de-l-etude-d-impact-environnemental-et-social.pdf \(woodside.com\)](#)