

## Indigenous peoples' ingenious approaches Combating oil's contamination of health and habitats

Aided by advanced technologies and assisted by intrepid NGOs, native people suffering under oil contamination are fighting for their health and homelands.

Oil and 'produced water' (waste water laden with carcinogens) from its pumping contaminate many of the world's largest and most precious wetlands - including the Amazon rain forest, the Niger delta and the Nile's Sudd – and other habitats in the vicinity of oil facilities and pipelines.



*Oil's pollution of South Sudan's water*

The quantities of this contamination are mind-boggling. To provide one of many examples: over the last six decades, the Niger Delta has been polluted by 408,000 tons of oil. Large though the figure is, Nigeria's is only the second gravest case of land-experienced oil contamination. The largest is taking place in western Siberia, whose taiga has been since 1960 the venue of the spilling and leaking of 873,000 tons of oil from and by oil facilities and pipelines.



*Pollution of the Taiga in Western Siberia*

The effects of this contamination upon human and environmental health are unimaginably horrifying.

### 3 examples:

1. Subjected to 45 years of oil spills and leaks and of unbridled pumping of produced water into the ambient environment, Peru's Amazonian peoples are experiencing an epidemic of cancer, deadly vomiting, miscarriages, births of deformed babies, skin rashes and many other grave ailments.

The "smoking gun" linking these ailments to the oil contamination: the extremely high levels of toxic heavy metals – such as lead – found in these peoples' blood and hair.

Read about it in [The Guardian article #1](#), [The Guardian article #2](#), [The Intercept article](#)



*Protest by indigenous people of desecration of their riverine habitats*

2. Such findings were also made in the indigenous people living in the vicinity of a major oil production facility in northern South Sudan.

Read about it in [a scientific report by Pragst and co-workers \(2017\)](#)



*Girl from South Sudan collects polluted muddy water*

3. In Nigeria, oil contamination is blamed for a rate of infant mortality in areas affected by it that is twice that of the national average.

Read about it in [The Guardian article](#)



*Pregnant woman in Nigeria facing high baby mortality rates*

The loss of health and life has been accompanied by that of livelihood. The tide of oil and its wastes washing over some of the world's most diverse and fragile habitats has rendered impossible fishing, farming and other occupations in them. Destitution and flight to mega-cities have often been the results.

All this should not be misconstrued to indicate that the world's indigenous people have taken their fate lying down. Quite the opposite. They have been valiantly – and often ingeniously – fighting the oil companies responsible for these shocking violations of human and environmental rights.



*Workers from Argentine firm Pluspetrol clean up after an oil spill in the Amazon region of Loreto*

## A look at 3 of the approaches taken by the indigenous peoples:

### 1. Nigeria and Ecuador: coalitions bringing the contaminators to court – and the battle to corporate headquarters.

In both countries, coalitions comprised of indigenous peoples and their allies have brought lawsuits in the UK, USA, the Netherlands and Canada that are history's largest (in terms of amounts of claims and numbers of plaintiffs). These coalitions have also occupied facilities located in the defendants' home countries.



#### *Key facts Nigeria:*

- Drilling of oil started in the Niger delta in 1958, and has resulted in the spillage of 408,000 tons of oil. This figure is rising at a rate of 35,000 tons a year. During a single, ten-year period, (2005-2015), there were more than 6,600 spills of oil in Nigeria.
- Since 1990, groups of indigenous peoples – notably the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) – launched campaigns for the cleaning up of oil contamination. The MOSOP's leader was Ken Saro-Wiwa, who was murdered by the Nigerian government in 1995, along with 8 other prominent Ogonis.
- Subsequent to these murders, Nigeria's anti-oil contamination campaign decided to pursue its quest for justice in international courts of law – with mixed results. 2 successes are to be mentioned:
  1. In 2009, to avoid having to face a court case in New York, Shell paid £9.6 million in an out-of-court settlement reached with the heirs of Saro-Wiwa and other Ogoni victims.
  2. In 2015, in which Shell dispensed £55 million in settlements for oil spills committed in 2008 and 2009 and affecting 15,000 fishermen from Nigeria's Bodo community.

- Newest court case: \$3.6 million suit brought in December, 2017 in the UK. Plaintiffs: 1,686,000 victims of Bonga oil field spillage allegedly committed by Nigerian subsidiary of Shell.
- Potentially biggest success of the campaign: in 2016, the government of Nigeria announced the launching of a \$1 billion, 25-year clean-up of the oil contamination of the Niger Delta.
- Oil companies involved: Shell, Chevron, Agip, Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation.



#### *Key facts Ecuador:*

- Oil production (and contamination) began in 1967 in the Lago Agrio oil field, which is located in Ecuador's Amazon rain forest.. Since then, 115,000 tons of oil have leaked out of facilities and pipelines. A further problem: thousands of pits in the jungle have been the recipients of 68 billion liters of produced water.
- Legal proceedings launched in 1993 by indigenous peoples produced in 2011 a \$9.5 billion judgment against Chevron in an Ecuadorian court of law. Since then, Chevron has been contesting this verdict in courts in Ecuador and in the United States and Canada. The judgment is to go for a clean up of the contamination.
- Oil company involved: Chevron

2. Peru: using high-tech – smartphones, image resolving software, drones and satellites - to turn indigenous peoples into contamination investigators – and to bring the battle into corporate boardrooms



*Key facts Peru:*

- Drilling started in 1972 in the northern Loreto district, which is located in the Amazon basin, and which is home to the Achuar, Kichwa, Kukama, Quechua and Urarina peoples. There was little adherence to environmental standards, with produced water's being fed directly into waterways and wetlands. Total amount to date: 3 billion barrels. This was accompanied by an abandonment or lack of maintenance of drilling facilities and pipelines. This has led to spills and leaks.
- The list of ailments suffered by the peoples' is long and horrifying. To force oil companies to live up to their commitments to clean up and to prevent further oil contamination, these peoples have been equipped by a university in the Netherlands and by a tech-minded NGO (Digital Democracy) with smartphones outfitted with ultra-sophisticated image recognition software.
- The peoples now patrol their homelands, looking for indications of contamination. To identify these, they use smartphones to take photographs of suspicious site. The photographs and the data they contain are then uploaded by the smartphones to drones circling the region. The drones in turn feed the images and information into the Internet, from they are channeled to Peru's petroleum supervisory authority and to activists who have dedicated themselves to confronting oil companies at their headquarters and conferences.
- This environmental monitoring is being complemented by the occupation by the indigenous peoples of oil facilities, and by the peoples' bringing of court cases, which has resulted in settlements with the oil companies.
- Oil companies involved: China National Petroleum Corporation, Petroperu, Pluspetrol, Frontera

### 3. South Sudan: the transformation of a humanitarian NGO into an intrepid contamination detective and campaigner.



#### *Key facts South Sudan:*

- In 2008, Sign of Hope, a Germany-based NGO providing medical and humanitarian assistance in South Sudan, became aware of new and troubling ailments on the part of 180,000 indigenous peoples living in the vicinity of a major oil field in northern South Sudan. Since then, Sign of Hope and the scientists working with it have devoted themselves to the systematic collection and analysis of samples of water and of residents' hair. The results of these analyses have proved that the residents are experiencing high levels of contamination by heavy metals, and that these have resulted from produced water spilled into ambient environment. The identification and proof of this crime against humanity and the environment have been accompanied by the vigorous mounting of an international campaign by Sign of Hope to alert the world of this situation, which may well encompass all of South Sudan's oil fields.
- Oil companies involved include: Petronas (Malaysia), China National Petroleum Corporation, India's Oil and Natural Gas Corporation



*Sign of Hope aids children from South Sudan drink clean water*