

In Nigeria's polluted Ogoniland, signs of a cleanup

March 8 2019, by Joel Olatunde Agoi



Decades of oil spills have left the southern Nigerian region of Ogoniland an environmental disaster zone

Young men in the Ogoniland area of southern Nigeria watch excitedly as engineers excavate heaps of polluted soil for treatment.

Decades of oil spills left their region an environmental disaster zone—but now hopes are high of a rebirth of farming, fishing and [clean water](#).

Alode-Eleme, located outside the oil hub of Port Harcourt, is one of 21 sites that the state-run Hydrocarbon Pollution Remediation Project has earmarked for restoration.

In 2011, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) estimated that decontaminating Ogoniland could cost a billion dollars (880 million euros) and take 30 years to complete.

In 2016, to great fanfare, the government launched the cleanup—although it took until January this year before engineers finally arrived.

"We are treating the soil for hydrocarbon contamination so as to make the land fertile for farming and vegetation," said Babatunde Benard, head of engineering firm Earthpro.

"Very soon, the water will be free of hydrocarbons."

Local youth leader Princewill Osaroejiji said he had been sceptical the cleanup would ever get going.

Today, though, he is relieved.

"At last, something concrete is happening," he said. "Very soon our people will begin to drink clean water, go to the farms and fish in rivers."



A cleanup has now begun at one of 21 sites in Ogoniland that the state-run Hydrocarbon Pollution Remediation Project has earmarked for restoration

Devastation

Oil was first discovered in Ogoniland, a region of about 1,000 square kilometres (386 square miles) on the northern edge of the Niger Delta, in 1957.

The early 1970s saw the start of major spills that made the region a byword for environmental catastrophe and, later, activism.

The maze of rivers and creeks are slicked black with oil, and nothing grows or survives.

Residents dig boreholes for water, but as soon as the taps are turned on, a smell emerges similar to used engine oil and cooking gas.

In places like Bomu, Bodo, K-Dere and Goi, signs warn residents—as if they needed it—that the water is not fit for use.

At a jetty in Bodo, one sign reads: "Polluted water! Do not drink, fish or swim here."



Some \$180 million has been released to clean the water, restore the mangroves and other vegetation, says the head of the cleanup project

But children still swim and bathe in the foul-smelling, oily river.

"Getting clean water is like gold here," said Kelvin, 16. "We depend on this bad water because we cannot afford a borehole."

Anger

K-Dere is home to 52 oil wells owned by the Anglo-Dutch oil giant Shell but they are not currently in operation.

Shell was the only oil major in Ogoniland but quit production and exploration in the area in 1993 because of community unrest.

The company, which has contributed towards funding the HYPREP cleanup, has another 44 oil wells in the area which are also not currently producing.

However oil pipelines from the rest of the Niger Delta still snake through Ogoniland, leading to occasional sabotage.



Residents dig boreholes for water, and in some places, signs warn residents that the water is not fit for use

Shell plans to resume its operations but faces resistance from the 800,000 [local community](#).

Activists want the firm to admit liability for pollution, pay them compensation and clean up the area.

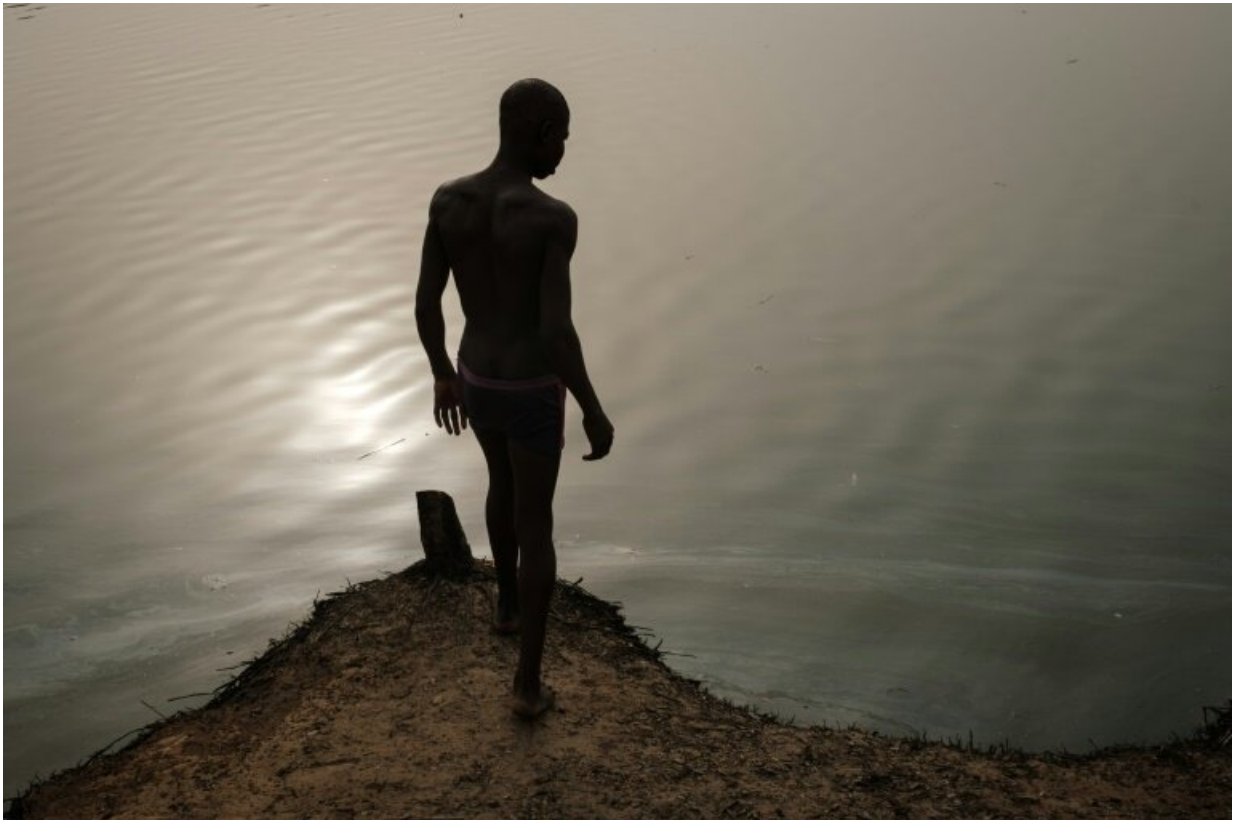
The firm has been accused of not doing enough to prevent pollution and clean up spills in the delta. In its defence, it blames pipeline sabotage for worsening the problem.

"For cleanup and remediation to be successful, the repeated re-

contamination of cleaned-up sites due to crude oil theft and illegal refining must end," Shell says on its website.

In January 2015, it agreed to pay more than \$80 million to the Ogoniland community of Bodo for two oil spills in 2008, following a court case brought in London.

And in December the same year, a Dutch court ruled that four Ogoni farmers and fishermen could sue Shell for environmental pollution, potentially paving the way for other cases in the Netherlands.



Ogoniland's maze of rivers and creeks are slicked black with oil, and nothing grows or survives

Years of uncertainty

The UNEP assessment of Ogoniland made stark reading. The study found high concentrations of hydrocarbons and benzene, a carcinogen, in outdoor air and drinking water. In some locations, benzene levels were more than 900 times higher than World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines.

The head of the cleanup project, Marvin Dekil, said \$180 million had been released to clean the water, restore the mangroves and other vegetation.

"A lot has happened since the flag-off in 2016 and now," he said. "Some people might think we are slow, yes.

"We did not want to do things the old ways, so as to achieve a better result."

Decontaminating the soil entails mixing it with a microbial treatment and nutrients that help to break down the hydrocarbons.

Alode-Elleme is the first site so far where the cleanup has begun, although work is due to start at the 20 others in the coming weeks, Dekil said.



Fishermen and traders complain of hard times because of the pollution

Environmental campaigners say locals remain guarded about how and where contaminated soil will be treated.

They also accuse the government agency of ignoring demands for drinking [water](#) as part of immediate measures before the work starts.

"HYPREP is only concerned about contract awards because that is an easy way to enrich individuals," said Fegalo Nsuke, who heads the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People, founded by the executed writer and activist Ken Saro-Wiwa.

Fisherman Bigboy Daamabel, who spent hours on the Bonny river, agreed.

"The fish are dead because of pollution. To get a handful, I have to set out early in the morning to the high seas."

As he disembarked from his wooden boat, traders rushed to buy the few fish he had managed to catch.

One trader, who gave her name only as Beatrice, said despite the new activity, people like her still face years of hardship.



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"Fish trading has been the only business I know how to do. But I hardly make enough money because almost all the fish are dead," said the 55-year-old.

"How long shall we continue like this?"

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