

Why Uganda must focus on renewable energy

As the month of August ended, President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni went on a four-day state visit to Equatorial Guinea. Among others, on this visit, the President sought lessons on oil exploitation from the country that is "cited as a textbook case for the oil curse".

Like him, this month, I too joined AFIEGO's partners, including community members, cultural and other leaders from Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) on an exchange visit to another African country that is also cited as a textbook case for the oil curse.

On the evening of Friday, August 4, 2017, I landed at Port Harcourt International Airport in Rivers State in the Niger Delta in Nigeria. Port Harcourt is about 440km from Lagos by air and is popularly known as "the oil city".

During my stay in Port Harcourt, I visited several oil affected communities which include the Goi and Bodo communities in the Ogoniland, and Imiringi and Tombia communities in Bayelsa State, Nigeria.

Having heard about how oil has terribly affected local communities and polluted the environment, I expected negative sentiments to be expressed about oil.

However, I did not expect the sentiments to be strong as they came. "Oil has brought nothing, but death to the people of the Niger Delta," was such a sad and common refrain.

Nigeria is one of Africa's largest producer of oil and the sixth largest oil producing country in the world producing 2.5 million barrels of crude oil per day.

Reserves of crude oil stand at 28.2 billion barrels and much of Nigeria's foreign exchange comes from oil exports; the federal government gets over 70% of its revenue from the oil sector.

With oil playing such a central role in Nigeria's economy and with the government earning the amount of revenue that it does from the resource, you would expect that the country's government would take better care of oil-host communities.

But no, it does not. Oil pollution of soils, water sources and the air by Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC), popularly known as Shell, has seen communities suffer!

Most communities in the Niger Delta are dependant on land and water for farming and agriculture. Oil spills, whose impacts are thoroughly documented in the 2011 United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) *Environmental Assessment of Ogoniland* report, destroyed farmlands.

Community drinking water sources were also contaminated. As per the UNEP report, they have dangerous concentrations of benzene that are over 900 times what is recommended by the World Health Organisation (WHO).

These are a few of the reasons as to why it is said oil brought death to the Niger Delta.

Air pollution arising from illegal gas flares, oil explosions and others has caused high concentrations of hydrocarbons in the air that are harmful to human life. I can only write so little, however, the sad story of oil affected communities in the Niger Delta goes on.

Therefore, as Uganda moves to producing first oil by 2020, these are the lessons citizens and government should learn. Firstly, communities' livelihoods must be protected by the government and oil companies since most Ugandans survive on land and water for food.

Secondly, all Ugandan citizens must be vigilant, tasking governments and oil companies to comply to environmental laws and international best practices. Lastly, with countries such as Britain and France making plans to transition away from using fossil fuels such as oil because of their association with climate change, Uganda too should focus on transitioning to cleaner and more accessible renewable energy options such as solar energy.

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