

## Local Responses to Global Ecological and Environmental Challenges

Samuel Aka

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Christian clergy and a prolific writer  
E-mail: [akasm29@gmail.com](mailto:akasm29@gmail.com)

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### Black Soot, Oil Spillage and Flooding in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria, West Africa



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Since the late 90s, the Niger Delta of the Federal Republic of Nigeria has been faced with many ecological threats. These include cholera outbreak, Lassa fever, oil spillage, black soot and flooding, among others. However, this essay focuses on black soot, oil spillage and flooding in four communities in Rivers State, one of the six states in the Niger Delta. These communities are most affected among the state's total of over one hundred. Their names are Aluu, Rumuolumeni, and K-Dere.



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Once a garden-like city-state in the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria with one of the richest local governments in Nigeria, Rivers State has lost its glory to black soot, oil spills and flooding. In addition, it is one of the most diverse city-states in Nigeria, where all the tribes in the country live. Its most recent head count numbered over 5 million people, or approximately 3% of the total population of Nigeria.

Port Harcourt, which once gained status as a "garden city" due to its

humid climate and colorful vegetation, has become a place where the inhabitants cry for help from toxic smog, incessant flooding and oil spillage. It is becoming increasingly dangerous to live in this city as these problems take over human use of air, land and sea. Eating clean seafood, which is one of the main sources of nutrition for Port Harcourt dwellers, is becoming a herculean task, since the rivers and seas have been corrupted with repeated oil spills. Most farming communities have now been deserted by humans and their animals due to oil spillage and floods. Moreover, the cost of living is on the rise daily as a multiplier effect of these ecological mishaps, and road networks are being cut off as a due to the rise in flooding. This has in turn resulted in greater insecurity from armed robberies and kidnappings; assassinations of political opponents, etc., are easily carried out due to poor road networks from flooding.

According to reports gathered from local communities across Rivers State, there has lately been a gray-colored atmosphere, with a black substance settling on towels and other cloth spread in the open. As a matter of fact, cars parked outside have had this black dust settle on them. Neighbors who normally collect rainwater have always decried the horrific black coloration they find in it. As if that were not enough, the issue of flooding has aggravated this problem in almost all the parts of the state. Although no life has been lost so far, residents have been driven from their homes. Both young and old fled their homes for fear of dangerous animals like snakes and scorpions, which are washed into their homes with the flood waters. In addition, properties worth millions were damaged, along with their electronic gadgets and automobiles. All of this happened in tandem with the dreadful black soot, which has caused the outbreak of terrible coughing among the population, including babies. These ecological problems are dire.

According to a local named Isiayei Timi, there is no escape from this fine black dust. Recounting his ordeal, he stated that whenever he brushes his teeth, especially in the morning, there is always a thick, dark

substance coming from his throat.

This situation has been further confirmed by doctors at Braithwaite Memorial Hospital (BMH) and University of Port Harcourt Teaching Hospital (UPTH), both in Port Harcourt, where there has been a recent upsurge in complaints of breathing difficulties by most local patients.

## **Aluu Community**

This is my own neighborhood, where every night a heavy red light like wildfire beams in the sky. Aluu Community is in the Ikwerre Local Government Area, and has five oil wells and one flow station owned by Shell Corporation. However, the community is distressed, like all others in Rivers State. The beaming red light is the flaring gas, which emits very dangerous substances, including sulfur dioxide and nitrogen dioxide, into



[File credit-acucircle.blogspot.com.ng]

the atmosphere in large quantities. Rain water here is often very black, which frightens residents. To make matters worse, residents depend on rain water to bathe, cook, drink and cultivate their crops. Most residents depend on rainfall for their daily washing and cooking because of an epileptic power supply and consequent lack of piped water. Most residents who are rich enough to afford generator sets and water boreholes use them for unsterilized water, which of course is better than the water collected from rainfall. However, Aluu is not affected by

flooding like other communities in Rivers State.

Furthermore, Aluu is one of the host communities of the Federal University of Port Harcourt, so it is not a remote village. Students who are drawn from all parts of the country, and some foreigners live here because of the short distance to campus. There are hundreds of off-campus hostels erected everywhere, with students paying exorbitant fees to secure decent accommodation.

## **Rumuolumeni Community**

*Rumuolumeni Community is located in the Obio/Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State.*

This community is in a desperate situation due to flooding. Residents are facing extreme problems in managing it.



[File credit- [armofhope.org.ng](http://armofhope.org.ng)]

There has been widespread panic in this community owing to the flooding of approximately 100 residential buildings, especially places of worship. Most residents who fled their homes took solace in unaffected churches. However, the state's governor, Barrister Nyesom Wike, calmed the situation by visiting damaged locations and reassuring their residents of the government's commitment to providing relief and curbing the flood menace.

It was later discovered that a number of environmental issues led to this flooding. While a few can be attributed to natural causes, the larger majority are attributable to the wrong use of the physical environment. These include bad road construction (not creating room for proper water channels) and poor waste management. One resident named Benibo Inyesoemi has given an eyewitness report. He narrates how many properties were lost to the flood due to poor road construction undertaken on the Rumuolumeni-Iwofe axis. He further conveys the serious state of the environment, especially the blockage of the only available canal with sands excavated by the company carrying out the road construction. He states, "We don't have a place to call our home anymore due to the emergence of the flood. Members of my family had no option than to sleep over in the church while I had to pass the night in my car. A neighbor of mine has relocated completely under duress. Earlier on, while the road was being constructed, residents of Rumuolumeni raised an alarm which attracted the attention of the governor. The governor observed the situation, and gave [a] directive to the company to canalize the road properly, but the construction company turned [a] deaf ear."

## **K-Dere Community**

Whenever K-Dere is mentioned in Nigeria, what comes to people's minds is oil spills. This community is located in Gokana Local

Government Area, and has over 60 oil wells. Oil exploration activities were primarily carried out by Shell Petroleum Development Corporation (SPDC). In the month of May, 2012, Environmental Rights Action/Friends of the Earth Nigeria (ERA/FoEN) received an emergency alert that a spill spreading 200 meters from Shell's asset had occurred. People in the community were observing Shell's contractual workers at the site when they perceived the smell of hydrocarbon and saw it gushing out of the earth towards them. On following it to its source, they suddenly saw the oil rising on the ground not a long way from where the workmen, and watched it expand. More places were now opening and percolating. Shell's response to this emergency was aberrant. Instead of halting operations in the exploration facility and carrying out thorough corrective maintenance, it simply flushed the spilled oil into the waterways and springs. The pipelines are exceptionally old; they were laid before the Nigerian civil war, which took place in 1967. It has been documented that they have over 10 spillage points.



[File credit- [grandmotherafrica.com](http://grandmotherafrica.com)]

## Summary

The black soot was first observed in Port Harcourt around November, 2016. Residents reported of hazy gray weather conditions, which prompted many living and visiting Port Harcourt to put on nose guards and other protective masks. Traders of foodstuffs were also observed taking additional measures, such as covering their goods with transparent nylon so as to prevent the settling of this toxic smog.

There was much sensitization by corporate bodies through the media for residents of Port Harcourt for safety prior to the government's response. In addition, there has been a serious campaign on Twitter and Facebook, with the hashtag #StopTheSoot.

In December, 2016, The Rivers State government finally responded by urging residents to be sure of its commitment to resolving the black soot menace. Meanwhile, the federal government also advised the state's residents that while all hands are on deck to addressing the issue, doors and windows should be properly shut.

However, ecological threats arising from oil spills, black soot and flooding share basic causes. While the source of flooding in Port Harcourt and other Niger Delta states can be directly linked to poor waste management, the same can be said to have caused black soot. Burning of waste in the open also contributes to the issue of black soot in Port Harcourt.

Besides the age of the crude oil channels across the Niger Delta, oil spills have been largely linked to illegal oil bunkering activities along the pipelines. The same issue also impacts the atmosphere negatively, leading to black soot.