



AFRICA INSTITUTE FOR ENERGY
GOVERNANCE

The Fight Against Big Oil in Uganda

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SCHMIDT FAMILY FOUNDATION/11TH HOUR PROJECT CONNECT 2019 SPEECH Diana Nabiruma, Africa Institute for Energy Governance

Hi everyone. Thank you for being here and for giving me the opportunity to share my story with you.

On August 8, 2019, I found myself surrounded by guns.

Oh, sorry, I got so excited about sharing my story that I forgot to introduce myself.

My name is Diana Nabiruma. I am from the beautiful country of Uganda. I am a lover of nature, and a lover of people. I believe that nature and people are God's gifts to us, and they must be protected.

To protect the things I love, I chose to live out my life as a human and environmental rights activist.

As many of us in this room know, many African countries are economically poor. As such, when oil is discovered in our countries – as it was discovered in Uganda – citizens view the discovery as a blessing that will make them wealthy.

Now, you and I know that this is not true. However, many people in Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Africa are unaware that oil is not a blessing that brings wealth.

Instead, it brings death!

The Ugandan government exploited the people's ignorance. They lied to our people that Uganda will become like the Middle East, where the people are so rich, and their princes are draped in gold if

Uganda drills for oil. This is rather unfortunate, don't you think?

To debunk the lies by our government, and to understand how oil impacts the environment and people, I visited Nigeria, which has been devastated by fossil fuel companies.

Then I found myself surrounded by guns.

Now, don't get freaked out. This story has a good ending.

With a group of delegates, we were in Nigeria in August 2019 to strategize on how to end fossil fuel investments in Africa.



As part of our learning and strategizing, we visited areas in Ogoniland where farms and waters have been poisoned by oil spills.

Before we could go, however, we needed to visit the Hydrocarbon Remediation Programme. That office was created to address the impacts oil spills have had on the environment and the people of Ogoniland.

The Hydrocarbon Remediation Programme's office was a strange one! It had many, many army men, not policemen, but army men with guns.

Two of these army men jumped onto our bus.

Now, I don't like guns; I doubt that any of you here love them. I therefore got squeamish when the army men unceremoniously jumped onto our bus.

I expressed my fear to my neighbor.

He told me that we needed those guns, because if we visited oil spill sites without them, we could be kidnapped!

"Uh," I said to him! "Get kidnapped?!?"

"Yes; we would get kidnapped," he told me very firmly.



Per 2018 statistics, Nigeria has the highest rate of kidnappings in the world. Why? Because of OIL!!

Communities in Nigeria have not benefited from oil. Yet their water, soils and health were and continue to be polluted by oil spills.

Incensed by this injustice and poverty, the people kidnap visitors to make some money.

When I heard the people's story and when I saw the rivers and soils that had been polluted, I thought to myself:

This should NOT be the story of Ugandans. Frankly, it should not be the story of any peoples anywhere! Also, nature should not be degraded at will!

Yet oil is not only destroying the land, waters and health in Africa, but right here in the U.S.

Through the support of 11th Hour and IUCN Netherlands, I was part of an exchange to the U.S. at exactly about this time last year. We came to learn more about the impacts of oil. We also sought to connect with others who are fighting against fossil fuel companies to build a stronger movement.

One of the places we visited was an elementary school in California. While we were at the school, we learned that over 60% of the pupils were asthmatic because of oil pollution. We were told that the children believe that being asthmatic is the norm. It was so sad to hear that.

And I felt mighty sorry for the poor children. Then I got a mighty asthma attack myself.

When I first felt my chest tightening as a precursor to the attack, I thought to myself, "Diana, you have discussed asthma attacks at length and you are experiencing psychological symptoms!"



Lo and behold, the symptoms were not psychological at all. I went into a full-on attack that was caused by oil pollution. It was terrible, and I felt that no one should live in such a terrible state.

Following my experiences in Nigeria and the U.S., I brought the truth back to our people in Uganda. My colleagues and I used films that were shot during our exchanges to show that oil is NOT the promised Messiah that our governments say it is.

We showed the films and shared our experiences with over 2 million people and our message was one: Oil will NOT deliver Ugandans into richness.

The interest in our message grew. Communities including youth and women who live around national parks told government to stay away from exploring for oil in the national park. This was after the Ugandan government launched an oil exploration licensing round in May 2019.

Journalists also started tasking Uganda's government to show why Uganda is engaged in oil exploitation efforts such as building refineries,



pipelines and others when other countries are transiting from oil.

And the interest grew. It grew to a giant community meeting of OVER 7,000 people. And I spoke in front of those 7,000 people to break the myths the companies and the government were selling to our people – that we would be wealthy like the Middle East.



Some communities that once wanted the pipeline in hopes of riches realized that oil will destroy our land, our agriculture, bring asthma and cancer. And it will weaken our social fabric.

And the people started to rise up against oil.

They wrote petitions to government, demanding that oil exploitation activities in rivers, lakes, national parks and forests be halted. They also started showing up at public consultations on proposed oil projects. They asked questions and challenged the content of Environmental and Social Impact Assessments. They demanded that oil projects not be approved.

The Ugandan government started to listen, and there was a commitment to stop oil exploitation efforts unless certain protections such as mitigation plans were put in place.

Interestingly, the oil that will be produced won't be used to meet Ugandans' energy needs.

Instead, barrels and barrels of it will be exported via an 897-mile pipeline to be consumed outside Uganda. The bits that will be left in Uganda will be too expensive to meet the people's energy needs. Not that the people need dirty energy. For their well-being and that of nature, we need clean energy.

The oil companies became very shaken up and tried to allay our fears, but we stood strong.

Our position remained the same: We want oil to remain in the ground, especially in protected areas because we know that oil brings death.

This is why we work day and night to protect our lands and natural heritage. We fight for the health of our loved ones. We fight for our food. We fight for our water. And we fight for our very life.

Our struggle must continue. Fossil fuel companies are insistent on destroying our national parks for oil! They are in our rivers, wetlands and farmlands!

Our struggle must continue, because we all believe that every human being has a right to live in a clean and healthy environment, a right to enjoy good air and the right good health over capital.

Nature also has a right to exist without being degraded. We therefore need clean energy to protect mother nature and our people!

For everyone in this room whether you are fighting against oil, natural gas, mining or agricultural companies, our struggle is a hard one. Like the biblical David, we struggle against big corporations, which are much like the biblical Goliath.

But if this little Diana and communities in Uganda can compel governments and oil companies to listen to them, anyone can.

When all of us in this room come together, we have power.

We must fight for our shared values that we hold strong, and stand and work together. And with the support of communities, businesses and donors, we will win!

Our love for the people and the environment will triumph!

Thank you.

