



Pioneers of the Planet

Episode One: Nnimmo Bassey

Catherine Karongo - This is pioneers of the planet coming from the UN Commission on Sustainable Development in New York, I'm Catherine Karongo. Pioneers of the planet will feature some of the world's top environmental advocates, people who have spent their lives advocating for a cleaner planet. With me is Nnimmo Bassey, he is the chairperson of Friends of the Earth International, the largest grassroots movement in the world, he is also the executive director of Environmental Rights Action, an NGO based in Nigeria. His campaigning has mainly been based on the oil industry and exploitation of natural resources, he has been arrested a number of times. In June 1996 he was imprisoned for 43 days for attempting to attend a West African regional meeting of Friends of the Earth. He is also a writer, a poet and a member of the International Steering Committee of Oil Lodge International. Welcome Mr Bassey, I would like to start with you explaining your environmental work, when did you start this?

Nnimmo Bassey - This would go back quite a bit, I started out as a human rights campaigner, in a time when Nigeria was under a military dictatorship. In the course of my campaigning I found out that most of the issues that we were fighting against had roots in the environment and in the activities of certain people and corporations in our environment. So with some friends, I began to focus on environmental human rights issues in the early 1990s, and we have been campaigning for getting the environment safer for people to live, because we base our philosophy on the African Charter for Human Rights Article 24 which says that every African must have the right to a safe and satisfactory environment for his or her development. That has been the underpinning idea behind our campaigns.

Catherine Karongo - Now, you are also a writer and a poet, what is your writing based on?

Nnimmo Bassey - Unfortunately, I would have loved to have been writing poetry about flowers and love but my poetry has been written as tools of resistance and for

mobilisation of people for action and so I write poetry on climate change, on destructive activities of oil corporations, I write poetry about agriculture and the destruction of bio-diversity. It's not so pretty but so far it has been useful in community work.

Catherine Karongo - Okay, so why have you decided to focus on issues to do with climate change and issues to do with the environment, is it because you felt that talking isn't doing that much justice and you need to write it down so that action can be taken?

Nnimmo Bassey - The issues are very dear to me; issues that have global implications, they are issues that require actions, at the grassroots, at the national, at the regional and continental and then global actions. Culture is one tool that can be used to create links at every level. In Africa we do a lot of communication through song, dance and poetry, even in the villages. So for me poetry is vital for communication, it's very useful to pass on information to people. It makes people pause to think because you say a lot in a few words. So my poems are good for music, I'm not a musician, but those who sing have put the words to music. The challenges we face in the environmental sphere are so enormous that we have to use every tool available to whip people up from complacency and get them to pay attention to what is going on around them. Sometimes people can sit in one country and say 'look at that country, with their suffering and their problems, how will they get out of that problem but I'm so far away it doesn't concern me.' But when you consider environmental issues, there are no national boundaries, we're all living in one world, connected and we have one fate.

Catherine Karongo - Has it worked?

Nnimmo Bassey - So far, for me, I can only bring about change one minute at a time. I'm not in charge of the whole world; we just have to do our bit. The tools that we use have helped to create a web of resistance around the world. We have people who are working and who are seeing that they can do something at their own level. We cannot do everything at the same time but every person can do something at every point in time.

Catherine Karongo - What are some of these changes that maybe you've noticed as a result of your advocacy and writing poetry?

Nnimmo Bassey - I find this the most difficult thing to answer because people are looking for big changes to say that we have attained something. But really in the struggle for human rights and environmental rights, little changes are worth celebrating and I would say that so far we have been able to place the environmental issue on the national agenda of many nations. People hardly overlook environmental issues, they are key issues. For something like climate change, people in the past were thinking that this was all a story but now nobody can deny that climate change is a major crisis, a phenomenon that is facing the world and so I think to sum up all the environmental campaigns around the world, we are adding up to make a difference. We are trying to build up societies where people have a space to do things themselves, where people would think of the impact of what they do on the next person. We are asking for accountability for transnational corporations to be held accountable and if they are hiding behind the shield of corporations then we take away the shield and expose the chief executive officers. And so in my campaigning we are going beyond singing and dancing, they are just one of the tools, we use litigation, we are trying to globalise litigation so that a corporation can not destroy a village in the back waters and then run off to where they came from to enjoy the good life. So we are trying to bring up a network of resistance so that whatever any corporation or individual or authority does anywhere in the world, they will be held accountable and they cannot escape that.

Catherine Karongo - Your advocacy work is also around the oil industry, why so?

Nnimmo Bassey - Because the oil industry is arguably the most destructive industry in the world. They are the most guilty of climate change because of fossil fuels releasing a lot of carbon into the atmosphere. They have driven civilisation for many years now and it's time for the world to rethink. We have to move away from fossil fuel civilisation and move to post-oil, post-petroleum civilisation. And we need to do this, we are campaigning to do this systematically, and it does need to creep upon us. We should work for it and move towards it. And whether you like it or not, the Oil Age will come to pass, whether we have millions of cubic metres of oil still in the soil because somebody has said that the Stone Age did not end for lack of stones and

the Oil Age will not end for lack of oil, so it's time for us to move. Moreover, where I come from, I have seen the destructive impact of oil exploration at close range. Human rights abuses, people killed, communities destroyed, water polluted, farmlands made totally unproductive. I've seen gas flares, gas that comes out of crude oil, being burnt into the atmosphere, daily and continuously for decades. And you can't close your eyes to what the oil industry is doing if you are living in a region where oil is being extracted. And I see this being replicated all over the global south, and more oil is being found all across Africa in the rich valley of East Africa, in the horn of Africa, along the West Coast of Africa, the gulf of Guinea, Angola, everywhere. So it's a big challenge that is confronting us and we need to face it squarely.

Catherine Karongo - Okay, you've talked about a shift to renewable energy and you've rightly stated in one of your pieces that crude oil is history. Do you think it's viable at this particular time to move to renewable energy sources?

Nnimmo Bassey - It just would take political will. If our political leaders would say yes we need to do something that would move the wall in the right direction towards a future of sustainability, we just have to move to renewable energies, we don't have any options. We have these resources available; we just need the technology to harness the resources. But today, I was watching one video on YouTube about the story of stuff, and in this one segment it shows governments shining the shoes of transnational corporations and I think that's very appropriate. Our governments have become so sub-servant to industry that industry is driving policy rather than government. Government is for the people and by the people and they should drive policies that would make life better for people and not just adding up to the profit of these corporations who are always reaping billions upon billions of profit.

Catherine Karongo - You're a critic of your government, you've even accused the government of greed; do you see any light at the end of the tunnel? Is there hope about this?

Nnimmo Bassey - Well, we cannot afford to be hopeless and we criticise because we want to see change. We don't criticise governments for the sake of criticising governments and if government does not accept criticism, that is too bad. Because criticism is made bad, it is like fertiliser, like compost, it makes things grow. And

governments that are not challenged by alternative views are governments who have driven themselves to a dead end. And so, I would say, one was particularly critical of military administration but now we have, for example in Nigeria, a democratic structure being built and that needs to be supported and so when we voice alternative views, it's to challenge the system and make them wake up to reality about the things that really affect people.

Catherine Karongo - Do you see a role by the developed countries... a role in the current oil crisis?

Nnimmo Bassey - Okay, the issue is the life in the global north, in developed countries, the level of consumption, the amount of energy required and the amount of resources required every day, if you want to continue at that level of consumption, we are going to need far more than one planet and we have just one. And so, when we campaign about the need to shift to renewable energies, to sustainable development, we are asking everyone in the world to understand that we are all in the same boat together. We are either going to go safely to the shore, or we are going to hit the rapids.

Catherine Karongo - And so what's your motivation?

Nnimmo Bassey - My motivation is a strong belief that people can make a difference, that we have to stand together as people around the world, join our hands across the deserts of this world, join our hands across the oceans, and not stand as islands in one place. We should join together to mobilise ourselves, resist all that needs to be resisted and then work for the transformation of our environment.

Catherine Karongo - Your last word?

Nnimmo Bassey - My last word is there is hope. Don't give up.

Catherine Karongo - Thank you Nnimmo for joining us and giving us your insight. That was Nnimmo Bassey, the Executive Director of Environmental Rights Action, a grass root advocacy NGO based in Nigeria.

