

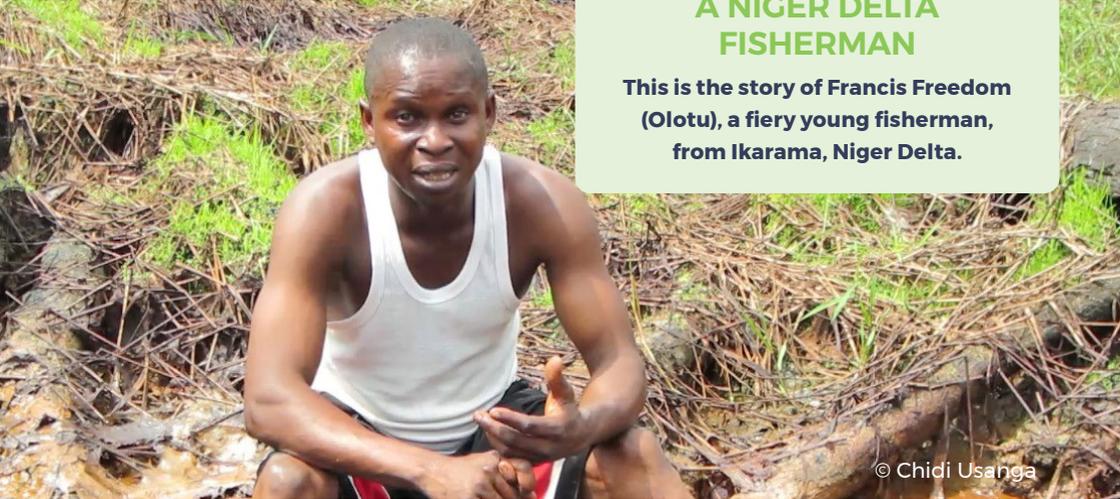


**Money
Makes
Change**

SHARING STORIES

A NIGER DELTA FISHERMAN

**This is the story of Francis Freedom
(Olotu), a fiery young fisherman,
from Ikarama, Niger Delta.**



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We first met when I drove through Francis' village in 2012. He tried to stop my car, but thinking he might be drunk, I drove on, with him shouting after me! A week later, it happened again but this time I stopped.

Mistakenly he thought I worked for Shell, the multinational oil company. He berated me for not cleaning up a massive oil spill that occurred some years earlier, polluting Oya Lake, where his family fished. He explained that 8 years earlier, a major oil pipeline was sabotaged (in protest to Shell's oil extraction), pouring its contents into the lake for some weeks. Eventually Shell contracted a local man to clean up the spill. He set it on fire - a lazy way to get rid of the oil on the surface but doing nothing to remove all the oil on the bottom of the lake.

I asked him to show me the lake and so began our relationship that lasted for many years. After nearly an hour of trekking through the bush, we arrived. Along the way

I noticed pools of hydrocarbon content (oil) seeping out of the ground before we reached the lake itself.

I promised him I'd be back. I sensed he trusted me even though I was not the first outsider to see the devastation. Prominent NGOs had visited over the years, but still no action had been taken. I returned with my team and Francis put Chidi, our cameraman, into a canoe and pushed him out onto the oily waters. He photographed the massive pollution and we gathered information on the spill and Shell's efforts to clean up.

Even though Shell claims it cleans up all spills (even those as a result of sabotage) we found evidence that they were not living up to their own standards. Francis had a right to be enraged. His beloved lake was saturated with oil and he could no longer fish in it. He couldn't pay for an education or roof the house he built for his family.

We decided to make Francis' concern a concern for Shell. The best way to do this was to send the evidence to Shell shareholders in the UK. In 2006, Shell had urged shareholders to reject a resolution to improve on their standards regarding risk analysis and social and environmental impacts in the Niger Delta. It was rejected on Shell's insistence that they operated within international standards, and that respect for people and the environment was already a core value of their business.

Within a few days, we heard from ECCR in the UK. ECCR had brought the resolution to the Shell AGM in 2006 and were bitterly disappointed it had been rejected. Our evidence clearly showed that in fact Shell's standards did not conform with international practices and needed significant improvement. ECCR took our evidence and presented it to Shell in London.

Within a few weeks we heard that Shell Nigeria were sending a team to do tests on Oya Lake. Francis was excited and took them around the lake as they did tests. A few weeks later, Shell Nigeria sent their clean-up team and spent a month at the lake, hauling out the polluted soil and placing it on the banks for purifying by natural attenuation (by the heat of the sun). Every day Francis would supervise their work and they came to respect this young fisherman.

After the clean-up, a government body analysed the soil and water, certifying the lake healthy again. Francis was not satisfied and believed oil was still present. He continued to protest, and we carried out more tests showing high levels of heavy metals in the water and soil. We found iron, lead, copper, cadmium and chromium, all far above the maximum permissible limits in Nigerian law. This level of heavy metal pollution is detrimental to the health of living organisms and can contaminate the food chain.

Francis did not get to fish in his beloved lake again. He took ill and died. We do not know the cause of his death. He is buried near Oya Lake, in the soil which he insisted is still polluted. We can never forget this young fisherman who won our hearts with his courage, perseverance and humour.

Francis was the David who dared to take on the giant of Shell and won. He showed us the power that we all have to bring about change, even when outwardly, it appears we have little. In his memory we will continue to insist that Shell clean and rehabilitate Oya Lake and every other oil spill from their pipelines.

- Father Kevin O'Hara

Published with kind permission by Father Kevin O'Hara, Chairman of SACA (Stakeholders Alliance for Corporate Responsibility). A St Patrick's Missionary Society priest, Father Kevin has been in Nigeria since 1980. He set up SACA, an NGO engaging with multinational oil companies in the Niger Delta to ensure compliance with international standards and respect for human rights.

For over 25 years, ECCR has taken an interest in the activities of Shell in the Niger Delta, and continues to do so, most recently in calling for their engagement with the recent Bayelsa State Oil and Environmental Commission. If you've been inspired by Francis' story and want to find out how you too can be a change-maker, visit our website www.eccr.org.uk or get involved in our **#MoneyMakesChange** programme.

