

# OP-ED

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## Davos and the Measures of Success

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The oil continues to leak into the Niger Delta, fouling the water, killing the fish and slowly poisoning the people who live there. It has been that way for decades.

The spills are the legacy of a half-century of exploration and development in the oil-rich region. They have devastated the lives of local residents who rely on the area's resources for their food, water and livelihoods and left many wondering about the future.

Arguments swirl around who is to blame. Residents say oil companies, including Shell, and the government, which owns about half of the oil industry, are responsible. The companies and the government counter that the spills are due to sabotage and theft, the result of armed raids and people stealing oil from the lines.

Demands by Delta communities and activists for information, independent systems for environmental clean-up and compensation, and for the oil companies to be held to account have been largely ignored by the government and dismissed as unnecessary, or unworkable, by the companies.

Incredibly, despite the obvious environmental devastation, there is almost no independent monitoring of food safety, health impacts or water quality. Companies like Shell effectively run the oil spill investigation and compensation processes, with a lack of transparency causing frequent conflict with and between oil-impacted communities.

Clean up is often delayed and inadequate. Regulatory oversight is theoretical at best. And the government is largely absent, except as a military force protecting oil operations.

For many communities, the contrast between the government's actions to protect the oil industry and the almost total lack of action to protect their human rights reinforces the perception that the government is on the side of the oil companies, regardless of what damage they may do.

Few expect the situation to change. The combined force of state and company is just too powerful. Profits take precedent over everything, including the rights of the people.

Our increasingly globalised world is seeing a growing number of similar stories as large, powerful trans-national corporations take advantage of outmoded systems of regulation and enforcement.

The current system is skewed in favour of business. It is not designed to enforce corporate behaviour or to address the changing nature of the global economy. People living in the way of development are seen at best, as a nuisance; at worst, as a threat.

There are some signs that things might be changing. A UN expert has proposed international guidelines encouraging states and companies to adopt policies and practices protecting human rights. And there is a growing awareness of the importance of ensuring that the people affected by growth are actively involved.

But the draft UN Guidelines are largely voluntary. They rely too much on willing companies and do little to address the many others focused only on profits. In order for there to be real change, there needs to be a fundamental shift from voluntary to mandatory standards.

This week, as the world's economic and political leaders gather to discuss "Shared Norms for a New Reality" at the annual World Economic Forum at Davos, there is the opportunity to make that shift. The forum offers the chance to rethink the way success is measured, and to embrace new formulas that include not just profits, but also people.

But the real test for those meeting at Davos is whether they are willing to engage with and strengthen their commitment to their own shared goals, and to those similar ones proposed by the UN, to help alleviate the suffering of so many people, including those in the Niger Delta.

It remains unclear if many of our business leaders still fully appreciate the potential impact their work has on human rights. And they seem most comfortable when action is 'recommended' or 'encouraged' - not when it is 'required'.

One of the "Shared Norms" at Davos must be that business does not abuse human rights. Another has to be that they are held to account if they do. Appeals to do right are nowhere near enough. Basic standards must be enforced.

The competing pressures of an expanding global economy demanding increasing resources and a growing world population demanding increasing space cannot be sustained. Unless there is real change, real commitment, the stage is set for rising tide of tension, suffering and unrest.

As the world leaders gather under the snow-white slopes of the Swiss Alps, events surrounding the oil-blackened Niger Delta are taking a significant step forward as a hearing opens in the Dutch Parliament about the conduct of Shell in the region.

The hearings could be the first step towards holding Shell to account for the damage it has done to the people of the Delta. But it has taken a half-century to just start to achieve justice. There are too many problems in too many places that simply cannot wait that long. Let us use the meeting in Davos to start to make a real and meaningful shift in how we measure what is important.

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