

Press release 27.09.2012

**THE 2012 RAFTO PRIZE TO NNIMMO BASSEY FROM NIGERIA  
AND THE FIGHT FOR BASIC HUMAN RIGHTS RELATING TO  
CLIMATE AND THE ENVIRONMENT  
UNTIRING DEFENDER OF VICTIMS OF CLIMATE CHANGE**

**The 2012 Rafto Prize is awarded to Nigerian Nnimmo Bassey in recognition of his long-term fight for people's right to life, health, food and water in a world affected by complex and threatening climate change and mass environmental destruction. Through his rights based work and criticism of prevailing systems, Bassey has shown how human rights can help mitigate the effects of these changes.**

**Nnimmo Bassey links human rights to the climate by demonstrating how climate change has the greatest effect on the world's most vulnerable people, the very people who have contributed least to the problem in the first place. By awarding its annual prize to Nnimmo Bassey, the Rafto Foundation underlines how the challenges we face regarding climate and the environment also have a human rights aspect. Such a reminder is necessary following the loss of focus on these issues in the wake of the disappointment over the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen in 2009 (COP15) and the annual follow-up conferences.**

Article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that "everyone has the right to life". When the international community is not able to negotiate binding climate agreements that can safeguard fundamental human rights, national governments must assume the responsibility.

**Climate justice**

A report from 2009 on Human Rights and Climate by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights states that the consequences of climate change are very unevenly felt. They have a much greater effect on poor countries and regions, i.e. the people who are least well equipped to deal with such consequences. It is also these who have contributed least to the damaging CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and human-induced climate change. This is a key point in Nnimmo Bassey's work to promote climate justice.

He is looking for new and sustainable solutions for those who throughout history have been denied their rights. The aims are for local communities to make sustainable choices with healthier levels of consumption, for rich countries to compensate poorer countries so that they do not extract all their resources, and for multi-national and other large companies to be forced to take human rights and the environment into account. In this way, Nnimmo Bassey links climate and environmental issues as a human rights matter to poverty and other social and economic issues.

By awarding the Thorolf Rafto Memorial Prize for 2012 to Nnimmo Bassey, the Rafto Foundation gives its support to his work in the organisations Friends of the Earth International (FoEI) and Environmental Rights Action (ERA).

### **Climate change – global challenges, local effects**

Human interference with nature has a global effect on the world's climate. Obvious examples are the extraction and consumption of fossil fuels such as oil and gas, and the deforestation of the rain forest. Some regions and their people are more vulnerable than others, often due to pre-existing social and economic issues, or culturally determined ways of life developed during a time where the climate was relatively predictable.

Climate change must be understood from a global perspective, but the specific effects are felt locally. It is people who suffer and who lose out on the basic human rights to life, health, food and water. These rights are protected by the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Many regions and ethnic groups throughout the world deserve to see the link between climate change and human rights brought into focus. The 2012 Rafto Prize highlights Africa in general, and people in Nigeria in particular. This helps illustrate the challenges the world faces today.

In the area around the Ikebiri river in Nigeria, fishing and agriculture are the most important ways of life. In one of ERA's field reports (23.10.2011) on the consequences of oil pollution along this river, one of the local inhabitants, Ayibaditimi Adikoko, observes: "The whole swamp has been wasted by the crude oil spill. [...] I could not even breathe freely while I was within the polluted environment. I had to cover my nose with a cloth because of the pungent smell that could make someone sick. In some sections you will not even see water. All you see is crude oil. And, no fish or animal can be seen alive there again. I saw only dead fish floating here and there. The impact of the spill is much, and we cannot use the place for anything meaningful. [...]. We have not heard anything about clean up the swamp for us."

### **Extraction damages the environment – consumption damages the climate**

The focus on Africa is important because climate change has an adverse effect on a large part of the African population's already precarious situation regarding social justice and economic rights. At the same time, Nnimmo Bassey's approach to these global challenges represents a contribution to the debate on climate and human rights that the Rafto Foundation wishes to recognise.

Nnimmo Bassey points to the injustices Africa has had to tolerate through the way the rich world has for many years exploited the continent's large resources of fossil fuels. "Africa needs soil, not oil," says Bassey together with others who fight for environmental and climate justice.

Exploitation of oil resources is one of the largest sources of carbon emissions to the atmosphere. This has consequences for life on a global scale and leads to the destruction and loss of way of life for a large section of Africa's population.

### **Nnimmo Bassey – a clear stand for human rights**

Nnimmo Bassey (born in 1958) was an architect who worked in the public sector until the 1980s when, as a member of the board of Nigeria's Civil Liberties Organization, he became involved in cases linked to human rights. In 1990, he witnessed the Nigerian military's attack on the village of Umuechem, following a peaceful demonstration against the environmental destruction caused by the oil industry. The fight to keep a natural and traditional way of life ended with two days of violent attacks which led to many tens of people being killed and a village being burned to the

ground. This was a turning point for Bassey. Together with his colleagues he took a clear stand, and in 1993 the Environmental Rights Action (ERA) was formed to fight for human rights in Nigeria. Bassey has also expressed his thoughts in a number of poems and has stated his opinions in several reports and factual books. His best known books are *Knee Deep in Crude* (2009) and *To cook a continent. Destructive extraction and the climate crisis in Africa* (2011/2012).

### **Think global – act local**

Bassey is a practical demonstration of what the slogan "Think global, act local" is worth. He travels around the world to motivate others to help in this global fight for human rights. In addition, he spends much of his time at the grassroots level in his own country to listen to and learn from the local population's thoughts and stories. At the same time, he shares his knowledge of their rights and how they can help improve their own situation.

Nnimmo Bassey's fight takes place on many levels, which are linked through the overarching common human rights issues:

1) On a local level in Nigeria and the Niger Delta, Bassey was one of the founders of Environmental Rights Action (ERA) in 1993. He is now Executive Director of the organisation. Over many years, he has stood on the side of local people and helped them fight for their rights. Oil and gas installations in general, and large-scale emissions in particular, damage agricultural areas, drive away local populations and pollute the air and groundwater. The work includes helping and training the local population in leadership, media contact and how to encourage people to demand the basic human rights of life, work, health, food and water. ERA has offered assistance in preparation for and during several court cases. Bassey is key to this on every level: he listens to and discusses with people in the villages and gives testimony in court. A large case regarding damage caused by gas flaring was won in Nigeria in 2005. In September 2008, Bassey gave testimony in a hearing in USA, organised by the Senate's sub-committee for human rights and law, regarding violations of human rights, the local population's lack of legal protection from oil producing companies and how these companies use Nigerian military forces to suppress local protests. Another large case relating to oil production is now being prepared and will be heard in the Hague in October 2012.

2) On a regional African level, since 1996 Bassey has led Oilwatch Africa, whose purpose is to help local communities in Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon, Congo, Ghana and Uganda to mobilise and fight damaging activities linked to oil and gas extraction. In 2006, this initiative had spread to South America and South East Asia and become Oilwatch International. In 2009, Bassey started a regional campaign to fight against and raise awareness about the impact the development of genetically modified organisms has on natural food resources in Africa. On many occasions, Bassey has worked to coordinate African interests across national boundaries, which helps raise awareness and assists the non-violent campaign for those human rights that are continually violated by major international companies' operations in Africa.

3) On a global level, since 2008 Bassey has been the Chair of the worldwide organisation Friends of the Earth International (FoEI), which has member groups in 76 countries. FoEI works on environmental issues from human rights, social and political context and in this way has a mandate that extends far beyond the traditional conservation perspective in other environmental movements. Climate justice is one of the organisation's most important campaign issues.

Nnimmo Bassey leans on scientific results and the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) when he points out that human activity affects climate and leads to global warming. For him, the atmosphere is a global communal area that everyone is responsible for, but that rich countries and large companies are on the verge of destroying through major emissions of greenhouse gases from burning fossil fuels such as oil, gas and coal. The consequences may be many. In a report from 2011, the IPCC refers especially to numerous types of extreme weather. In his work, Bassey has focused on drought and desertification in the southern hemisphere. For areas and people who are already vulnerable, this has dramatic consequences such as a lack of food and water and thereby worsening health. It may also lead to forced migration and displacement of people. In this global perspective, Bassey also states that rich countries have a "climate debt" that must be repaid to those who have contributed least to climate change.

Within this framework, Bassey works to highlight and communicate the importance of social and economic change with an aim of looking after the planet and promoting development. A sustainable society is vital in order to meet people's basic needs and to protect their rights both now and in the future.

### **Oil production's negative consequences for people in the Niger Delta**

For many decades, oil pollution and gas flaring have caused irreparable damage to the Niger Delta. The Nigerian government has reported more than 3200 cases of pollution between 2006 and 2010, many of which have never been cleaned up and few have resulted in appropriate compensation. ERA also says that rusting pipelines and other dangerous infrastructure cause problems. Oil companies often claim that pollution is the result of theft, vandalism and sabotage. Despite appropriate political decisions, Nigerian authorities are unable to build a more robust and environmentally friendly oil and gas industry, where revenues can also benefit ordinary people and where human rights are protected.

In May 2010, Nnimmo Bassey said to The Observer newspaper that while we see a great deal of effort to stop pollution in USA, companies in Nigeria cover up those cases which damage the environment and destroy people's way of life. He says that the oil leakage in the Gulf of Mexico can be seen as a metaphor for what is happening in Nigeria and other parts of Africa on a daily basis.

Gas flaring has been practiced since the 1950s and still occurs despite it now being illegal. If it is not done in an appropriate way it can lead to widespread pollution and have serious consequences for the health of the local population. Life expectancy in the Niger Delta is 41 years, while in the rest of Nigeria it is 48 years. Gas flaring is also a global problem as it results in enormous amounts of CO<sub>2</sub> being emitted into the atmosphere. Nnimmo Bassey says that this illegal activity intensifies the poisoning of the environment and people in the region and calls on everyone to stop this "madness".

### **Climate damage is a violation of human rights**

Nnimmo Bassey is awarded the 2012 Rafto Prize for his untiring work to raise worldwide awareness about the human rights aspect of climate and environmental challenges in general and on the African continent in particular. He fights for vulnerable local communities' rights to life,

health, food and water. He demonstrates that underprivileged groups are hit especially hard by climate change and environmental destruction.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights states that all nations are bound by international law to protect individuals from the effects of climate change. Climate change is a global problem that crosses national borders. Where the international community has not been able to agree on the necessary measures to limit climate change, it is the Rafto Foundation's opinion that the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights obliges the individual states to work to manage and counter climate change in a way that protects the individual's basic rights throughout the world. In this case we wish to underline that:

- The Nigerian state has a special responsibility in terms of human rights to prevent environmental destruction in connection with oil production in the Niger Delta from depriving the local population's right to life, health, food and water.
- International companies that operate in Nigeria have a responsibility to prevent their operations damaging the environment and depriving local populations of their right to life, health, food and water, irrespective of the Nigerian authorities' ability to safeguard its citizens' rights.
- All nations have a responsibility from a human rights perspective to prevent human-induced damage to the climate having a negative effect on people's fundamental way of life in a global perspective. All nations have an obligation to ensure the right to life, health, food and water throughout the world. As Nnimmo Bassey points out, this responsibility weighs most heavily on the most privileged parts of the world population.

The Rafto Foundation, Bergen, Norway, Wednesday 15 August 2012

**The 2012 Rafto Prize is awarded at the National Venue of Theatre (Den Nationale Scene), in Bergen, Norway, on Sunday, 4 November 2012 at 18:00.**

**The Rafto Foundation** in Bergen, Norway, was established after the death of Professor Thorolf Rafto in 1987, in gratitude of his longstanding work to help people who are oppressed and persecuted, and in the realization that this work must be ongoing.

**The Rafto Prize** is a human rights award established in memory of Professor Thorolf Rafto. The Prize is awarded annually by the Rafto Foundation. Several Rafto Laureates: Aung San Suu Kyi, Burma (Rafto Prize in 1990), people of East-Timor by Josè Ramos-Horta (Rafto Prize in 1993), Kim Dae-jung, South-Korea (Rafto Prize in 2000), and Shirin Ebadi, Iran (Rafto Prize in 2001), have subsequently been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. The Rafto Prize contributes to a focus on human rights violations and on people and communities which need the attention of the world.

**[www.rafto.no](http://www.rafto.no)**

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