

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

The price of a barrel of oil is currently almost \$140.00. The prospect of \$5.00 per gallon fuel for the US consumer is here, and probably here to stay. According to the New York Times (June 9th 2008), in the middle of our recent economic recession, some households are spending over 15% of their household income on gas for their cars. In Europe, there has been massive protests by truckers unable to make ends meet given the soaring fuel costs. And there is more. The headlong run into ethanol by global agri-business – as a short term fix for US oil-dependency and as a way to capture record oil profits – has helped produce a massive and rapid conversion away from food crop production in parts of the global south. To make things worst, the tight oil market and exploding oil prices (they have doubled in the last 12 months) means that fossil-fuel based inputs to agriculture have hugely increased the costs of production for farmers everywhere. For many of the poor in the global south this means basic food prices they cannot afford and fertilizers they cannot acquire. The food, energy, sustainability conundrum has come to represent a ‘perfect storm’ of all that is wrong with our modern system of livelihood.

To ask, in other words, what can be done? Demands that we place the story of oil and gas in Nigeria on a much larger canvas. The Curse of the Black Gold has shown what are the true costs of the oil and gas that we consume. These costs include not just the social, environmental and economic costs for the people of the Niger delta but the need to make transnational oil companies accountable for their actions. The book also speaks to the hidden costs that the US incurs in its global oil acquisition strategy: spending billions of dollars on a US military budget to police oil producing regions and to assist corrupt oil producing states upon whom they depend for their sweet crude; the subsidies that Big Oil receives through forms of foreign assistance; the devastating costs of carbon emissions and the enormity of the global climate changes problems that the world must now confront. And not least, the story of black gold highlights the need to hasten a transition to alternative and ecologically sustainable sources of energy.

So where to begin? First of all keep yourself informed. The energy sector is big and complex. But there are a number of research and advocacy organizations that document the human and environmental rights and corporate accountability surrounding oil and gas production in oil-producing states and in the US. A number of human rights organizations – Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, International Crisis Group - are especially active in oil-states like Nigeria, Angola, Russia, Ecuador and the Caspian region and a number of advocacy groups are specifically dedicated to oil issues in petro-nations (for example AmazonWatch, OilWatch, Environmental Rights Action). But these struggles are not so different from the Big Oil politics on the home front whether in cancer alley in Louisiana or in Alaska and the fragile arctic regions (see the websites of the Pacific Environment and Louisiana Environmental Action Network). Here are a number of other useful organizations:

The Oil Drum
Peak Oil
The Post Carbon Institute
Global Oil Watch
Energy Bulletin
The Post Carbon Institute
The Rocky Mountain Institute

There is no shortage of information and many ways to be involved!

Second, help work toward revenue transparency in the extractive industries sector. Nobel Prize winner Joseph Stiglitz has written that the first step toward reversing the oil curse is to “remove the layers of secrecy that continue to surround so many aspects of the [oil and gas] industry”. Corruption flourishes behind closed doors and hurts everyone, especially the poor. We know that the transnational oil companies pay foreign governments in order to acquire oil concessions. Oxfam among others is currently attempting to help push legislation through the US Congress to ensure more open business practice in the extractive industries, and to ensure that oil and gas companies respect the rights of poor communities. Global Witness, Revenue Watch and Oxfam are all actively involved in this transparency initiative and need your support (www.pwypusa.org, www.globalwitness.org and www.oxfamafrica.org).

Third, be a responsible investor. Some of you may have pension funds or 403b/401k accounts; typically oil and gas companies are part of these enormous portfolios. Perhaps you own shares in oil and gas companies perhaps as part of your own personal retirement fund or your personal investment portfolio. Your shareholder status allows you to bring pressure for corporate accountability and for companies to not only meet best practices for corporate social responsibility but to also to remove the layers of secrecy that surround so many aspects of the oil and gas industry. Just recently (May 2008) there were a number of such shareholder campaigns around the ExxonMobil meeting (http://www.exxposeexxon.com/newsroom/exxon_agm.html). There are a number of socially and environmentally responsible funds in which you can invest which monitor social and environmental records for the energy sector.

Fourth, help to separate oil and state! It has been said that the Bush administration placed the American petroleum Institute in the White House. But the political influence of Big Oil is much more pervasive and has a long and dark history of meddling, corruption and political influence. The ties between Big Oil and Big government must be severed! Through a website Follow the Oil Money you can see whether your Congressperson or Senator has accepted campaign money or other financial support from oil companies and the nature of their voting record on energy issues. The record is clear: for example House and Senate members who voted against clean energy proposals accepted 4 times more oil money than those who voted in the public interest; the 25 representatives who took the most money from Big Oil voted for Big Oil 86% of the time! Start with your own political representatives. In addition, Oil Change International has been active in revealing the ways in which the oil industry is massively subsidized through foreign aid. Between 2000 and 2007 the industry received over \$60 billion in subsidies from multilateral and bilateral sources. Taxpayer money designed for the alleviation of poverty is in fact a huge corporate subsidy. Help end this corporate welfare now! (for more information see <http://oilmoney.priceofoil.org/> and <http://www.endoilaid.org/>).

Finally, help reduce your own energy consumption and carbon emissions footprint. Work toward alternative energy futures and contribute to a program to deliver the US from its oil addiction! There is lots that you can do. The Natural Resources Defense Council has a good website (<http://www.nrdc.org/air/energy/genenergy.asp>) which provides all sorts of resources for your to reduce your energy footprint: take public transportation, fly less-bicycle more, use hybrid vehicles, increase the energy efficiency of your house or apartment (turn out the lights, sleep your computer, take control of temperature, unplug appliances, weatherisers, fluorescent bulbs, low energy appliances), take advantage of some of the new subsidies to install solar panels, use renewable fuels.

Make use of your consumer power to shift the market toward green technologies!