
Gabon: Marc Ona Essangui awarded 2009 Goldman Environmental Prize

At a ceremony held in San Francisco, USA on 20 April 2009, Marc Ona Essangui was presented with the prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize, which recognizes grassroots activists who take significant risks to protect the environment and communities in their countries.

A founding member and executive secretary of Brainforest, a leading Gabonese environmental NGO founded in 1998, Marc Ona was one of six recipients of the prize this year, which is awarded annually to environmental activists in six different regions of the world. Marc Ona was selected primarily for his efforts to protect and preserve Ivindo National Park, located in northeastern Gabon, from the controversial Belinga iron ore mining project, which calls into question the country's commitments to environmental protection.

Ivindo National Park is situated in the Congo Basin rainforest, the world's second largest after the Amazon rainforest. With the support of other members of Gabonese civil society, Marc Ona headed up a major campaign to inform both the Gabonese public and the international community about the potential social and environmental consequences of the Belinga mining project, and to demand that the government carry out all of the necessary social and environmental impact assessments.

Marc Ona is also at the forefront of the Gabonese civil society efforts to raise awareness of the need for transparent and responsible management of the revenues generated by the mining sector. He is the national coordinator of the Publish What You Pay (PWYP) coalition in Gabon, which has fought for greater transparency around the government's negotiations with a Chinese mining consortium for the Belinga iron ore mining project.

With regard to the construction of a hydroelectric dam as part of the Belinga project, Marc Ona told the Pan African News Agency: "We believe that the reasons to protect Ivindo National Park also include Kongou Falls (located inside the park), which form part of our national heritage." Brainforest has launched an international petition through its website to save what is widely known as "the most beautiful waterfalls in Central Africa".

The many battles spearheaded by this tireless environmental activist also include his tenacious opposition to the construction of an airport north of Libreville in the Mondah Forest, which is a legally protected area. Under Marc Ona's leadership, the Gabon Environmental Platform, comprising close to 20 environmental NGOs, mobilized forces to warn of the consequences of this project, particularly the dangers it entailed for Akanda National Park, an internationally recognized site for migratory birds.

A similar mobilization of Gabonese NGOs, with Brainforest in the lead, took place to harshly condemn the conduct of the French energy group AREVA and its failure to rehabilitate the uranium mines formerly run by its affiliate COMUF in southern Gabon. The company is now being charged by local communities for numerous cases of poisoning and health problems.

Marc Ona is also an active member of the multi-stakeholder national committee (or Interest Group)

responsible for the implementation in Gabon of the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI). The EITI is an international initiative to promote greater transparency in the oil, gas and mining sectors, and involves cooperation and dialogue between governments, companies and civil society. Gabon joined the EITI in 2004.

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