

Publish What You Pay Press Release

PWYP campaigner receives prestigious environmental prize

London, 20 April 2009: Publish What You Pay (PWYP) Gabon Coordinator Marc Ona Essangui has won the prestigious international Goldman Environmental Prize, which is often awarded to individuals who take significant personal risks to protect the environment and local communities.

A founding member and president of Brainforest, Gabon's foremost environmental NGO, Ona is one of seven winners of the US \$900,000 prize which is shared equally between winners from six continental regions.

Ona won the 2009 Goldman Environmental Prize for Africa in recognition of his work to protect and preserve Gabon's Ivindo National Park against a controversial iron ore mining project called Belinga - one of the largest development projects ever undertaken by the Gabonese government. Ivindo National Park is situated in the Congo Basin Rainforest which is the second largest rainforest in the world. Ona led an extensive public awareness campaign to inform Gabonese citizens and the wider international community of the environmental and social problems that the Belinga project would bring, and called on the government to conduct full environmental and social impact assessments of the project.

"I am truly honoured to receive this prize and find great comfort in the fact that my work has caught the attention of the international community," said Ona. "I believe that African countries should pursue development in a fair and accountable manner which respects environmental concerns. Gabon must live up to its conservation policy and listen to the views of its citizens who want to protect one of our nation's greatest assets - Ivindo National Park."

Ona is also at the forefront of Gabonese civil society efforts to raise awareness of the need for transparent and accountable management of natural resource revenues. He serves as national coordinator of the PWYP national coalition in Gabon, which has campaigned for greater transparency around the negotiations between the government and the mining companies involved in the Belinga project. A leaked copy of the agreement between the government and Chinese company CMEC, for example, revealed concessions which were not favourable to the people of Gabon, such as a 25 year tax break for CMEC. These efforts led the Gabonese government to renegotiate the contract on better terms and with additional conditions. The government also increased its share in the project from 10% to 25% and established a monitoring committee for the project which includes civil society.

Ona is also an active member of the national multi-stakeholder committee which oversees implementation of the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) in Gabon. The EITI is an international framework for increased transparency in the oil, gas and mining sectors which involves cooperation and dialogue between governments, companies and civil society, and Gabon's commitment to the global initiative dates back to 2004.

"This prize is recognition of the critical role played by civil society activists across the world fighting with tenacity for what is in the best interest of their country and the well-being of citizens. Ona has had the courage to ask for increased transparency and accountability in the management of resource wealth so it can benefit all Gabonese citizens and improve development outcomes for the country," said Radhika Sarin, Publish What You Pay International Coordinator.

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Past recipients of the Goldman Prize for Africa include Nobel Peace Prize laureate Wangari Maathai and Ken Saro-Wiwa who was executed over his opposition to Shell's activities in Ogoniland in the Niger delta.

Civil society campaigners in Gabon have often faced significant risks and challenges by bringing sensitive topics related to environmental protection, corruption and revenue management into the public domain. In January 2009, Ona and four other anti-corruption advocates received high-level backing in the form of a letter from the US Congress rebuking the Gabonese authorities for arbitrary arrests and charges that appear to be in violation of basic human rights guaranteed under international treaties to which Gabon is a signatory¹. The men were released following international outcry but the charges against them have still not been dropped.

Ona and other campaigners in Gabon have also endured other forms of harassment and sanction, such as travel bans that have prevented them from leaving Gabon and a temporary suspension of the activities of PWYP Gabon, Brainforest and several other Gabonese organizations in January 2008. The PWYP coalition has mobilised international support for local civil society activists and their freedom to carry out their activities without fear of interference or threats to their personal security.

"The free and active participation of civil society in overseeing how natural resource revenues flow from companies to governments is a prerequisite to ensuring that this wealth is translated into tangible benefits for people on the ground," said Sarin. "PWYP congratulates Marc Ona for his tremendous efforts and salutes the Goldman Environmental Prize for recognizing this important work."

Notes to Editors:

Publish What You Pay (PWYP) is a global civil society coalition that campaigns for transparency in the payment, receipt and management of revenues from the oil, gas and mining industries.

Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative – for further information visit www.eitransparency.org

Goldman Prize – This year's Goldman Environmental Prize was presented in San Francisco on Monday 20 April 2009. The laureates will now travel to Washington, DC, for another ceremony to mark Earth Day this Wednesday. For further information visit www.goldmanprize.org

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¹ See PWYP Press Release "US Congress Condemns Arrest And Detention Of Anti-corruption Advocates In Gabon", 23 January 2009 at <http://www.publishwhatyoupay.org/en/resources/us-congress-condemns-arrest-and-detention-anti-corruption-advocates-gabon>