



***BROKEN BACKS & MORE:***  
**STORIES OF  
AGGRIEVED  
OIL SECTOR  
WORKERS IN  
UGANDA**



PHOTO CREDIT: NEW VISION

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# Introduction

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Uganda's oil and gas sector has been tipped as a game changer, a sector that has immense job creation potential among others.

Consequently, working for the oil and gas sector is a dream that some Ugandans harbor. Many a Ugandan hope to improve the lot of their families by working for the sector.

However, is employment in the oil and gas sector a panacea to community members' challenges?

In May 2025, Africa Institute for Energy Governance (AFIEGO) interviewed oil sector workers from the oil host districts of Hoima and Buliisa in Western Uganda.

The workers were previously employed with companies such as Mota-Engil Uganda, SBC, EnviroServ, KarmodBETA and CIVITEC among others. The above companies were contracted by either the Government of Uganda (GoU) or

TotalEnergies E&P (U) to develop oil sector infrastructure.

While the oil host community members had hoped to improve their families' lives by working for the oil sector, their stories show that some workers were left in worse positions than they were in previously.

Moreover, the stories portray an oil sector that sometimes flouts key Ugandan labour laws, while perpetuating injustices.

We invite you to read the workers' stories and advocate for justice for those that suffered dismissal, workplace accidents, gender-based violence and other infractions.

We also invite you to engage the GoU to promote jobs in green economic sectors, while also ensuring that labour laws are respected.

Some workers requested to remain anonymous. Pseudonyms with an asterisk (\*) have been used for such workers.



**My back was  
broken on an oil site,  
and I was abandoned  
–Rogers Byaruhanga**



On August 10, 2023, a statement issued by TotalEnergies EP Uganda indicated that the company's Tilenga project achieved 20 million man-hours without Lost Time Incidents (LTI). Before that, in January 2023, the company had announced reaching 10 million man-hours without LTI.

LTI is a workplace injury that results in an employee being unable to work for more than 24 hours, or which leads to permanent disability or death. It's a lagging indicator used to measure a company's safety performance based on past accidents.

**Rogers Byaruhunga's story below appears to paint a different picture.**







My name is Rogers Byaruhunga. I'm 26 years old, and I come from Wanseko village in Kigwera sub-county, Buliisa District – right in the vicinity of Uganda's major oil projects.

In 2022, I found an opportunity to work on TotalEnergies' Tilenga Upstream Development Project.

My job was not with TotalEnergies directly; rather I worked with CIVTEC Africa Limited, a subcontractor of Mota-Engil Uganda. Mota-Engil has a \$261 million contract for site preparation and other works for Total's Tilenga oil project in my district.

I joined the team as a scaffolder and plumber after going through the proper application process. Like many young men from the area, I hoped this would be a stepping stone towards a better future – for my family and me. For just over a year, I gave my best, showing up early and working long hours.

But everything changed after a workplace accident left me with a broken back. The accident happened on 28th January 2024.

It happened on the job. One moment I was standing on scaffolding, the next, I was on the ground – injured, in pain, and uncertain of my future. A tool hit me while I was on the ground.

I was rushed to Dulwich Medical Clinic in Buliisa for first aid by CIVTEC. Thereafter, I was referred to City Medicals in Buliisa for X-Ray, and Ruby hospital in Kampala for an MRI.

I was also referred to Sky Front Orthopedic clinic. I was diagnosed with a lumbar soft tissue injury and a slipped disc, which causes me pain by pressing on the sciatic nerve in my right leg. While CIVITEC initially met my medical costs, they stopped without explanation.

Further, my contract, which had been renewed without issue before, was suddenly cut short – three months before its official end. I didn't even get a chance to recover before being replaced.

To make matters worse, I was not given adequate medical care. To this day, I still rely on crutches to walk, and the pain hasn't gone away. My family has incurred huge costs to treat me.

But it seems the company saw me as disposable the moment I could no longer carry tools or climb scaffolds. This realisation was very hurtful on my end.

Truth be told, the situation at work was always tough even before my accident. We were often overworked and expected to push through long days with little rest. Complaints went unheard.

If you were not from the same tribe as your supervisor, you could feel the difference in how you were treated. Rumormongering and false accusations were regular.

Ugareports: Tilenga Project achieves safety milestone as it logs 20 million work hours incident-free: <https://ugbusiness.com/2023/09/company-releases/tilenga-project-achieves-safety-milestone-as-it-logs-20-million-work-hours-incident-free#:~:text=TotalEnergies%20EP%20Uganda%20has%20reached,was%20realised%20in%20January%202023.>

Some of the mistreatment seemed intentional – meant to break workers' spirits and push them out, only to be replaced by people preferred by certain supervisors. And these replacements seemed ready before you even left.

In my case, I was replaced just days after my injury. Sometimes I wonder whether the spanner that hit my back was dropped intentionally. Competition among workers was intense, and unfortunately, no thorough investigation was ever conducted to find out the truth about my accident.

The pressure was always there – do the work, stay silent, or risk losing everything.

What made it harder was the lack of humanity. There were no checks to see how we were doing –physically or mentally. Safety guidelines were talked about but not always followed. You could feel that profit came before people. You just had to tolerate the suffering.

Still as a young man seeking work experience, the job gave me a chance to meet new people and grow in confidence. I learned to adapt, to push myself. This is probably the only positive I realized working at the Tilenga project.

But I had hoped for more – a chance to build a career, to explore new skills, to earn a stable income.

I believed that if I worked hard, the company would value that. I thought that if something went wrong (like the accident I suffered), my family and I would be looked after. Unfortunately, that was not the case.

Today, I speak out not for sympathy, but for justice. I believe no worker should be abandoned after getting injured on the job. I believe companies – especially those involved in billion-dollar projects – should take responsibility when accidents happen at work. Full medical care should be a right, not a request. Families of injured workers should be supported, not left behind.

I also believe TotalEnergies has a duty to ensure its contractors and subcontractors uphold human rights and safety standards. Words on paper mean nothing if they're not enforced on the ground.

There should be regular independent surveys on site to ascertain the working conditions. If someone had asked us what we were going through, they would have heard the stories of overwork, fear, and neglect.

My story is just one, but it represents many. And until something changes, more workers will continue to suffer in pain, as the powerful companies count their huge profits.

## Overworked, under–paid and unfairly dismissed: This is my oil job experience – Frank Atuhura \*

My name is Frank Atuhura \*. I'm 38 years old and I come from Kasinyi village, in Kigwera sub–county, Buliisa District. I want to share my experience as someone who worked briefly on the Tilenga oil project, which is being developed by TotalEnergies E&P Uganda.

In September 2022, I got a job as a casual laborer with Mota–Engil, one of the contractors working under the Tilenga project. I was selected from the local community as a Project–Affected Person (PAP), and I saw this opportunity as a step towards improving my life and supporting my family.

I was given a six–month contract, but unfortunately, before three months elapsed, I was out of the job.

I was dismissed over what I insist were unfair allegations – that I had consumed alcohol on the job. In truth, I had a disagreement with my supervisor, and that seemed to have influenced the decision to terminate my contract.

All in all, the working conditions were tough – often expected to work through break or lunch times, with rest only guaranteed on Sundays.

When I fell sick, I wasn't paid for the days I missed, even though I was on a salaried contract. What I was paid was also less than what my contract stated, and there was no clear explanation for the deductions.

Despite the talk about skills development and capacity building for workers, I didn't gain any new training during my time there. I had hoped that this job would give me the experience – and savings – I needed to start a small business, instead, I left early, with no new skills and without full payment for the work I had done.

After my termination, I reached out to the Community Liaison Officer (CLO) to lodge a complaint and seek redress. I was assured that my concerns would be addressed, but to this day, I have received no feedback or compensation for the months I worked.



I remain unpaid for the time I served, and no effort has been made by TotalEnergies Uganda or its contractors to resolve my grievance.

Going forward, I would like to be paid for the work I did before I was terminated on baseless accusations. I also believe that TotalEnergies and its contractors should pay more attention to how workers are treated, especially by supervisors. Clear communication, fairness, adequate and timely compensation plus respect go a long way.

This is not just about my case. It's about making sure the promises made to local people are fulfilled in practice, not just on paper.

After all, TotalEnergies has publicly positioned itself as a company committed to local content, workforce development, and capacity building.

In numerous communications, it emphasizes its intention to prioritise Ugandan employment, enhance training programs, and empower local enterprises and institutions. As a Project-Affected Person (PAP) and a community member selected for employment, I was hopeful that these promises would translate into meaningful opportunities for people like me.

Unfortunately, that was not the case in my personal experience.

With multi-billion-dollar investments in Uganda, TotalEnergies has the capacity and, more importantly, the moral responsibility to uphold high standards of employee welfare, fair labor practices, and human rights.

While the company continues to earn accolades for its environmental, social, and governance (ESG) commitments, these achievements are meaningless if the real experiences of local workers like myself continue to be ignored, dismissed, or covered up.



## My oil work experience left me traumatised – Olive Nyakato

My name is Olive Nyakato. I'm 29 years old and I come from Kasinyi village, Ngwedo sub-county in Buliisa district.

I worked as a plumber for KarmodBETA – a subcontractor on the Tilenga Project under TotalEnergies – for one year and one month between 2022 and 2023.

I joined after applying through the official process. I was excited at first. We were told this project would transform our region, offer jobs, and promote local content. I thought it was a chance to lift myself and my family out of poverty.

But the reality was different.

My contract was terminated three months before its end without explanation. Before that, it had always been renewed, so I didn't expect sudden termination. They simply told me it wouldn't be renewed – no clear reason, no process of appeal.

That was not the only injustice, though.

During my time with KarmodBETA, I faced constant verbal threats and intimidation. We were made to feel like we had no rights. If you came from Buliisa like I did, you were treated differently – locals and non-locals didn't even share the same transport vans.

Worse still, there were serious issues of sexual harassment.

Some supervisors and male colleagues made inappropriate advances or touched me in ways that made me uncomfortable and unsafe. Complaining was never an option – it only made things worse.

Being a woman in a male-dominated environment came with additional challenges. We were expected to do the same heavy lifting as men, even if it was beyond our physical capacity.

The justification? "You're in the same department, so you must do the same work." There was no consideration of our physical limitations. Instead, there was unhealthy competition and disrespect from male colleagues.





Tribalism was another huge issue. If your supervisor was from a different tribe, you were likely to be ignored, undermined, or targeted. It affected work assignments, evaluations, and how grievances were handled.

There was barely any time to rest. Even drinking water while seated could get you into trouble. You could only take a break after completing your assignment – and even then, it was rushed and on your feet.

Sick leave was out of the question. Falling ill was almost like signing your own termination letter. Absenteeism, even for valid health reasons, led to harassment or outright dismissal.

I also had deductions made for NSSF (National Social Security Fund), yet to this day I cannot access my savings. No one has explained why or how I can claim what's mine.

KarmodBETA is a joint venture between Uganda's BETA–JMG and Kenya's Karmod Ltd, and they were awarded the contract to construct the EPC (Engineering, Procurement, and Construction) camp for the Tilenga oil project – a site meant to house over 4,000 people.

TotalEnergies claims this is part of their strategy to promote local content and empower Ugandan contractors.

The Petroleum Authority of Uganda (PAU) reports that 90% of the personnel hired were Ugandan and that over 35% came from the six Albertine region districts, including Buliisa.

But the numbers don't reflect the lived reality on the ground. Local people like me were systematically undermined. Tribalism, segregation, and exclusion were rampant.

TotalEnergies promotes its community support and local procurement policies, but in practice, officials and contractors often sidelined locals.

Even the small businesses surrounding the camp – ones we expected to benefit local people – were set up by company insiders and officials, denying locals a chance to earn some extra money offering services to the camp.

I had expected a decent wage – enough to start a small business of my own, to lift my family out of poverty. I had hoped for long-term employment to build capital. I believed there would be benefits and a sense of dignity. None of these things happened.

What I saw instead was indifference to our humanity and instead a tendency by the company to prioritize its own interests – profit at all costs.

TotalEnergies needs to come back on the ground – not with public relations campaigns, but with action. We, the people of Buliisa, deserve better. The principle of 'local-local' content should mean prioritising neighbouring communities for employment, contracts, and services.

Recruitment should be transparent and free of tribal bias. Women's physical realities should be respected in job assignments. And sexual harassment should be met with zero tolerance – not silence.

# Overworked & choking on oil waste smell! These are my oil job memories

– Moses Kiiza \*



The smell of that waste! I cannot describe it!

It was so bad, that it made me leave my job! Other factors made me quit the job too, but the smell yo! It was bad! No human being should have to smell a smell like that.

I am getting ahead of myself however. Allow me to tell you my story properly. From the beginning, or part of the beginning.

My name is Moses Kiiza\*. I am using a pseudonym because I want to tell my story without fear of reprisals.

I am thirty (30) years old.

I am a resident of Hoima district. It is in this district that I was born, raised and went to school.

My parents were poor, and I dropped out of school after Primary Seven. My parents could not afford to pay any more school fees for me.

When I dropped out of school, I trained in motor vehicle mechanics, and also took driving lessons.

Unemployment is a major issue in Uganda, with more youth than adults being affected by the challenge.

I was therefore lucky that I managed to get work after being trained.

I worked with China Railway in 2015 and China Railway 7 in 2018 as well as 2020. They were constructing roads and I worked as a driver on the projects.

Thereafter, I applied for a training by TotalEnergies and I was successful. I was taken for defensive driving training.

Despite my training, I was out of a job when I heard that EnviroServ, a waste management company that is providing services to TotalEnergies, was looking for workers.

I was at home when I heard the news that the company was coming to our village in Nyahaira, Hoima district. Our village chairman, Mr. Pascal Ozelle, informed us that they were coming.





When the company's representatives finally came, they informed us that there are job opportunities for youth. They asked whoever wanted a job to write down their names on a piece of paper, fold it and throw it in a box.

Community members were asked to randomly pick out the papers, like they do in raffles! Those whose names were drawn and read were given jobs.

I was among the lucky ones that day and I got a job. I was elated. I had always wanted to work with EnviroServ but I had had no opportunity. Our colleagues were working there and they were making what we considered good money. I have children, and a family, and I need to look after them. I needed money.

In January 2024, I started working with EnviroServ. My job was to dispose off petroleum waste. The waste was green in color, and it is liquid. It has a very bad smell. Very bad smell, if you may allow me to say that again.

We would open the truck, and pour the waste into a hole in the ground.

The waste was transported from the field to us in a truck.

We would then pour chemicals into the waste. An excavator would also help with the mixing.

I worked with EnviroServ for only seven months. The bad smell really drove me away from the work. It was so bad that it could make me lose appetite and develop body weakness.

The salary that we earned was also insufficient. We were being paid UGX 302,000 yet those working in Buliisa with Total were earning more.

The work that we were doing was also hectic. We could work from Monday to Monday without rest.

My message to oil companies is: supervise your sub-contractors better. They should pay workers money equivalent to the work done and the time spent. More so, they should observe public holidays, and let workers rest on weekends. Workers also need to have time to relax and check on their families.







## Segregation made me quit oil sector job

– George O\*

A day full of hope: that is how I can best describe the day I got a job with SBC, the company that is constructing Kabalega or Hoima International Airport in Hoima district in Western Uganda.

That airport is important for Uganda's oil industry, as it will be the carriageway that will deliver people and materials needed to develop the industry.

I did not know all this on that sunny day in August 2018 when SBC officials came to Nyakasenene, our small village in Hoima district. In fact, I did not know much about the oil industry then.

We had been told that casual jobs were available for people like us, and that is as much as I knew about the sector.

I wanted a job, because growing up, I wanted to be well off. My parents were peasant farmers during my childhood, and I did not enjoy growing up poor. I always fantasized, thinking that when I grew up, I would work hard and grow crops such as maize to make some money.

I was inspired by the farmers like our village chairperson, Mr. John Vianney Obe, that I saw getting rich through growing and selling crops such as sugarcane.

They say that we don't always become what we dream, and when I failed to become a successful farmer, I looked to an oil sector job.

On the day that SBC came to our village, they informed us that they wanted workers. The company told us that they wanted people who could at least read and write. Having attended school until Senior One, I qualified for the job. I could read and write.

SBC registered those who attended the meeting, and gave the first eight people at the meeting jobs. They informed us that they would call us and we would start work.

The phone call came two weeks later, in August 2018. I was very happy.

I was given a job in the survey department and my day-to-day work involved clearing vegetation to create roads for the surveyors. They were setting boundary marks for the airport. It was nice working with the surveyors but the payment was little.

I therefore left the job at SBC, and I applied for a job with Mota–Engil Uganda. Monta–Engil was awarded a site preparation contract by TotalEnergies for the Tilenga Industrial Area in 2022.

A colleague from SBC informed me that Mota–Engil was looking for machine operators. This was in 2022. I was hopeful when I submitted the application. In fact, I was sure that I would get a job. This is because I paid a bribe. I got the job in 2022 and I was so happy because I was recruited as a skilled person. Skilled people make more money.

During my work with Monta–Engil at the Tilenga Industrial Area in Buliisa district, I operated a Bomag. This is a machine that compacts soil.

While I had hoped to enjoy my work, I did not. This is because there was segregation at work.

For instance, some of us from the Bunyoro sub–region had to rent our own houses in Buliisa, while those from Kampala stayed in the camp.

Those from Kampala were also being paid more. We were receiving UGX 800,000 as monthly payment while those from Kampala were receiving UGX 1.2 million. Those from Kampala were also given medical insurance which we didn't receive. I left the job after a year because of I could not stand the segregation.

I hope to get a good job with a good company. A good company is the one that pays adequate money, and does not segregate.





## My supervisor resigned on my behalf — David Balijunaki

My name is David Balijunaki and I am aged thirty-nine (39). I stay in Kichoke village, Kigwera sub-county in Buliisa district. When oil projects commenced in the Albertine Graben, oil companies came to our village and sensitised us about the available jobs.

I applied, followed the due process and obtained a job through merit. I started working with Mota-Engil Uganda under the batching department in 2023. I worked with the company for one year and three months.

My contract got terminated four (4) months before it ended without pay because my child got sick and was admitted to Hoima Regional Referral Hospital. My wife is often responsible for childcare but she was away when our child got sick. She had been selected for training by TotalEnergies, and was studying catering.

I officially asked for permission from work to go and attend to my sick child. I received the permission. While I was away, I would regularly update my supervisor about the state of my child.

I returned to work two weeks after having requested for permission to leave but surprisingly, I found that the human resource officer had written a resignation letter on my behalf.



When I asked him why he wrote a resignation letter on my behalf, he told me that it was for my own good and that if I still want the job, I can re-apply.

While working with the company, I was overworked. We were also not given time to rest. Moreover, the feeding of workers was poor.

Regarding payments, workers' salaries were slashed. For instance, when I had just started working with the company, I was earning UGX 850,000 but by the time of termination, I was being paid UGX 420,000.

My colleagues and I went on a work strike for three days. We withheld our labour. However, when the Resident District Commissioner (RDC), Deputy Police Commander (DPC) and the bosses came, we were told that those that still want to work can continue to do so while those found striking will be punished.

Mistreatment of workers by the supervisors was too much.

My expectations from working in the oil sector were not met. I had expected to earn enough money to take care of my family and I, while also starting a small business. I did not start the business.

My message to oil companies, especially Mota-Engil is: compensate me as my contract was terminated before its end.

Oil companies should also avoid slashing workers' salaries without following the due process.





# STORIES OF AGGRIEVED OIL SECTOR WORKERS IN UGANDA



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