

Environmental Degradation and Oil Politics in Nigeria’s Niger Delta

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Abstract

The Niger Delta Region is one of the richest regions of Nigeria as regards natural resources endowment. Indeed, the region is blessed with large quantity of crude oil as well as extensive forest, good agricultural land, among others. These natural resources, especially oil and gas have attracted the attention of oil companies, whose activities often result in multitude of economic and social problems, such as environmental pollution, occupational dislocation, cultural extinction and rural/urban drift. Arguably, regarding extraction of oil in the region, there have been ecological devastation and neglect arising from oil production. These activities have left much of the region uninhabitable, desolate and poor. This has also affected the economy and quality of life of the inhabitants. The Nigerian state and the multinational oil companies operating in the region make little or no concrete effort to control the environmental problems occasioned by oil exploitation and exploration in the region. This paper examines the environmental challenges caused by oil exploration in the Niger Delta. In doing this, the paper employs secondary sources of historical data. The study, therefore, concludes by recommending, among others, that the Nigerian state should enforce stringent environmental laws in order to regulate environmental consequences of oil exploration in the Niger Delta.

Keywords: Degradation, Environment, Nigeria, Oil, Politics



Introduction

The economic issue and the ecological challenges in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria dates back to the precolonial period. Indeed, the Niger Delta as a region has come a long way with a pride of place in socio-economic and political history of Nigeria, not because of her present level of development, but chiefly due to the fact that it brings higher revenues via the oil and gas industry than other sectors of Nigerian economy (Udeke & James, 2015). Aghalino (2009, pp. 57-66) contends that the Niger Delta could be regarded “as one of the critical fault lines of Nigerian politics”. Ikhejube (2018, p. 278) argues that oil exploration and exploitation have become a curse for the people of the oil-bearing communities in the Niger Delta region. Environmental and ecological devastations, economic and social poverty and constant conflicts have become the order of the day in the region (Ikuejube, 2018). Environmental stress and degradation are the main challenges being faced by the inhabitants of these oil-bearing communities of the Niger Delta.

In addition, the Nigerian state in cahoots with the multi-national oil companies (MNOCs) operating in the Niger Delta makes little or no effort to control and manage the environmental problems occasioned by the oil exploration, production and exploitation (Nwakwo, 2015). More importantly, people’s attitude in this region, especially the youths, also contributes to the ecological challenges being experienced in the oil-producing communities of Nigeria’s Niger Delta (The Punch, 2024). This is so because oil pipe vandalisation, leakages and theft caused by these youths have become a reoccurring decimal, thus, adding to the environmental degradation of the region. These have their negative effects on their environment, too. Indeed, they have impacted negatively on land, farmland, water, aquatic life, among others, in the Niger Delta. Put differently, these have led to land dereliction, deforestation, loss of farmland, water and air pollution and spillage in the environment of the oil-bearing communities.

Moreover, the Niger Delta’s environment is in a big crisis because of the level of devastation done to it by the multi-national oil companies (MNOCs) operating in the region. Essentially, oil production, exploration and marketing by the international oil companies (IOCs) have given birth to conflicts between inhabitants of the Niger Delta and the Nigerian state on one hand, and between the people of the region and oil companies on the other (Ikuejube, 2018). Hence, it has been argued among scholars that what the oil-producing communities get in return for being the indigenes of the region, where Nigeria gets its oil wealth from, is “grave injustice in the



distribution of wealth, going *pari-passu* with the ruination of the ecology and the entire physical environment of the region” (Offiong & Oriakhi, 2005). These challenges have generated conflicts, which in turn undermine nation-building and development. In fact, these conflicts have become evident in ethnic and regional politics in demographic and census controversies in the politics of revenue allocation formula, in all the politics of the national question, struggle for state power, among others (Lewis, 2008).

However, it is important to note that oil and gas which have brought so much blessings to the Nigerian state can be said to have become a curse to the people of the oil-bearing communities of the Niger Delta, because of the ecological and environmental degradation, persistent pollutions that follow oil exploration, production and exploitation in the region. Omitola (2012, p. 254) explains that the exploitation of crude oil goes on in the Niger Delta without due cognisance to the opinions and aspiration of the inhabitants both by the oil companies and the Nigerian state, which by virtue of the Petroleum Degree of 1969, Offshore Decrees, 1971 and Land Use of 1978 got the largest percentage of the oil receipt. These decrees are not only numerous, but have their various dimensions to the detriment of the people’s interests by the Nigerian government and International Oil Companies (IOCs) who ought to have been the protectors and custodians of the environment, especially both the terrestrial and aquatic habitants (Udeke & James, 2015).

With secondary sources of historical data, this paper examines the roles of the Nigerian government and the multi-national oil companies (MNOCs) in the petroleum industry as regards the exploration, production and exploitation of oil and gas in Nigeria’s Niger Delta with the attendant effects on the environment and the people of oil-producing communities. The following section explains some concepts. The next section reviews the theory of the study, sketching a profile of the “resource curse” theory. The next section discusses environmental degradation and oil politics in the Niger Delta. The last section concludes the study with policy recommendations.

Conceptual Clarification

The Concept of Environment: Regarding this, there are different schools of thought having diverse views and opinions. *The New Webster Dictionary* sees environment as the surroundings, for instance, material influences that affect the growth, development and existence of a living thing. Also, it can be defined as all of the conditions affecting growth and development in an area



or place where an organism or a group of organisms is successfully situated (Ikuejube, 2018). Yakubu cited in Ikuejube (2018, p. 281) sees “environment as the total sum of the surrounding external conditions within which an organism, a community or an object exists”. More importantly, environment can be referred to as the surrounding or conditions where a person, animal or plant lives or operates.

Flowing from the above, environment can be described as the total sum of all conditions; be they external or internal that impact or affect the growth and welfare of man and other organism on a regular basis. The physical environment can be taken as the totality of natural elements and artificial objects in the surrounding. For the survival of human beings and other living organisms in the environment, taking care of the environment in respect of quality via sustainability is key. To achieve this, there must be a reasonable, harmonious and healthy relationship between man’s activities and the natural resources. This must be regulated very well (Gasu & Gasu, 2011). Put differently, sustainability of the environment is very crucial and it must be managed with a view to maintaining the nature, human beings and the organisms inhabiting the environment. In fact, taking measures that would produce a reasonable measure of protection of ecology and the environment from the activities of the multi-national oil companies (MNOCs) are important in Nigeria.

Niger Delta: Our focus here is the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Niger Delta can be explained geographically and politically (Jerome, 2005). For the purpose of this study, geographical definition of the Niger Delta will be made use of. The States here include: Rivers, Bayelsa, Delta, Akwa-Ibom, Imo, Edo, Cross-Rivers, Abia, Ondo and Anambra. They could be referred to as the oil producing states of Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the “resource curse” theory. Basically, the “resource curse” thesis attributes to “the minerals, economic, political, social and environmental ills (Usman, 2018). This theory seeks to explain why resource-rich countries have not benefited from their God-given resources (mineral resources). The direction here is that mineral resources are seen to be the cause of problems in the global south (Usman, 2018). Therefore, the “resource curse” theory has



economic, political, social and environmental perspectives straddling sociology, political science and economics. The study will only limit itself to social perspective of the “resource curse” theory. This aspect showcases poverty, rising inequality and human developmental challenges despite the huge inflows of mineral wealth. Attention has been given to the massive inequalities arising from mineral exploitation and exploration, especially in countries with ethnic diversity such as Nigeria (Usman, 2018). The argument or thesis here is that oil wealth often directly goes to tiny economic and political elite while the majority of people, especially, outside the Gulf Arab countries, are wallowing in poverty. Hence, mineral-rich countries like Nigeria, Angola, Equatorial Guinea, among others, may have high per capital incomes, but equally have high poverty rates (Ross cited in Usman, 2018). Scholars such as Ross (Ross cited in Usman, 2018, p. 529) contend that the “resource curse” undermines women’s economic empowerment by reducing opportunity for their entry into the labour force. This is most evident in the Middle East, the Gulf Arab countries (Usman, 2018).

Also, these resources transform the state to a rentier state preoccupied with consumption rather than the creation of wealth. This makes the society’s incentives to be skewed towards the management and distribution of oil wealth, instead of human development. More importantly, according to Usman (2018, p. 530), “the environmental dimensions of the “resource curse” have drawn attention to the negative externalities of mineral extraction in pollution and environmental degradation. These include, among others, oil spills, destruction of flora, fauna and aquatic resources and air pollution”.

With regard to Nigeria, the works of the Niger Delta environmental activists such as Okonta & Douglas (cited in Usman, 2018, p. 530-531) explain the exploits of the multi-national oil companies (MNOCs) in all exploration and production, environmental pollution in collaboration with Nigerian state and local political elites. Worthy of note is that some of these scholars turn down outright the commodity-centric nature of the “resource curse” thesis. They, however, point to the marginalisation, injustice, oppression and degradation of oil-bearing communities by a group of domestic and transnational actors, which turned peaceful protest of communities to violent militancy in the oil-bearing region (Obi, 2010; Nwajiaku-Dohu, 2012 cited in Usman, 2018).



Udeke & James (2015, p. 405) corroborate this thesis by submitting that “this rentier mentality by the state and multi-national oil companies is said to be responsible for the developmental challenges facing the oil producing communities and States in the Niger Delta”.

Environmental Degradation and Oil Politics

Nigeria as a country is known worldwide as an oil producing nation. Indeed, she is the Africa’s largest producer and world’s fourth-largest exporter of Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) (EIA, 2016). However, this oil and gas sector is infamous for its dysfunction (Usman, 2018). This is evident in huge leakages of oil and gas receipts and in revenue management which place the country in the lowest ranking in corruption and governance indices. This sector’s dysfunctions are generally believed to be problems of corruption and the “resource curse” syndrome (Lewis, 2018). Udeke & James (2015, pp. 406-407) argue that most of the angst against the IOCs in the host communities arose out as a result of the way the indigenes of the oil-bearing communities lost their farmlands, crops, fishes and economic trees without or with very little compensation.

Before the discovery of oil in the Niger Delta region, the main occupation of the people was fishing (Okpevra, 2015). Some of the indigenes relied on fishing and other aquatic business as their major source of livelihood. Also, they engaged in agricultural activities on the rivers’ bank where food crops were planted. There are other economic activities that generate income for the oil-bearing communities of the Niger Delta. They include forest products such as timber and non-timber forest products. Timber is used for canoe and paddle carving, while non-timber forest products such as raffia palm and bamboo are utilised for the production of local gin, wine and fishing gears (Babatunde, 2010).

However, with the discovery of oil in the region, came the activities of IOCs. This birthed the oil exploration, production and exploitation by MNOCs and other industrial activities; pollution of air, thus set in thereby, leading to environmental stress and degradation (Lewis, 2018). Indeed, some parts of agricultural land have been rendered useless and become unproductive due to soil losses. Importantly, there is environmental pollution and contamination of water and rivers. This has rendered drinkable water unsafe for drinking, causing death of aquatic life (Ikuejube, 2011). The resultant effects of this are the hardship being faced by the inhabitants of the Niger



Delta. In other words, these victims of environmental degradation are forced to move to other towns and villages in search of greener pasture and decent life.

Further, oil exploration and production has brought adverse environmental effects on the forest, soil and water of the oil-bearing communities of the Niger Delta. This has introduced various harmful and toxic organic compounds into the natural environment during oil exploration. Some other forms of pollution occur with negative consequences on the geo-chemical composition of the soil, river and other components of the environment (Ikuejube, 2018; Udeke & James, 2015). The environmental degradation and ecological challenges as a result of oil exploration and exploitation have rendered fishing and farming useless in the Niger Delta. Added to this is the pollution and continuous flaring of gas from oil prospecting and production, which equally rendered farming and fishing activities almost impossible in the region (Odogbor, 2005; Offiong & Oriakhi, 2005; Ikuejube, 2018). Babatunde cited in Ikuejube (2018, p. 284) argues that “all the economic effects translate to pecuniary effects, which can be measured in terms of reduced income and the loss of alternative uses of resources consumed by the oil communities”. The overall economic effects include the dislocation of traditional economic activities, associated livelihood pursuits and dangers to human health.

Also, the resultant effect of environmental degradation on oil production activities in the Niger Delta is the reduction in the standard of living of the inhabitants of the region. This has led to the increase in the level of poverty among vulnerable groups like farmers, fishermen and their dependent (Ikuejube, 2018). Arguably, some portions of land in the region, especially, the oil-bearing communities have been despoiled. This is as a result of despoliation of the earth crust removed from the production wells, which are toxic in nature and consequently impacted the immediate environment negatively. The Niger Delta region has suffered a major challenge of deforestation, especially reduction in mangrove species (Aghalino & Eyinla, 2009; Omitola, 2012). Multiple of coastal fauna species and several farmlands were already lost to oil spillage in the Niger Delta (Olujimi, Emmanuel & Sogbon, 2011).

More importantly, the oil-producing communities in the Niger Delta continue to lose lives as a result oil exploration and extraction. These losses are at times caused by environmental pollution, oil theft and leakages of the oil pipeline. The environment and the lives of the inhabitants of the oil-producing communities are being endangered by massive exploitation of the crude oil



from the region. It is logical to argue that the people of the Niger Delta live in penury and abject poverty, while IOCs and the Nigerian state live in luxury due to the rent being collected from crude oil production. The environmental degradation and ecological problems has birthed disagreement between the people of the Niger Delta and the MNOCs on the one hand, and between the people of the oil-bearing communities and the Nigerian state on the other. This has led to a series of crises which constituted an impediment to the flow of investment and economic development of the region.

Important infrastructure like electricity, modern town halls, health facilities, foot bridges, and schools sponsored or financed by IOCs are hardly in existence in the region. The natural water in the region has been polluted to be of any use due to oil exploration. This has been the genesis of disagreement between the people and the IOCs. This later led to the formation of different associations such as Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF), the Niger Delta Avengers (NDA), among others (Usman, 2018). Some of these associations initially employed non-violence for the political, economic and environmental rights of the people. But when this non-violence failed to work, they began to kidnap oil workers, causing crisis in the production of crude oil in the region, until the Amnesty Programme of the late President Umaru Yar'Adua in 2008 (Lewis, 2018).

The government both at the centre and the state levels feed fat on the oil rents. For example, fishing activities in the region are affected when oil spillage occurs. This has rendered the land useless; and the high technical cleaning method of opening the soil to pour crude, which later resurfaces spoil the waters, yet the indigenes are prevented by the government from having direct access to the IOCs (Ikuejube, 2018). These spillages destroy the fishing ground of the region, but the Nigerian state has been preventing people from receiving the sympathy of the oil company, which has affected development in the region. Despite the ecological effects of oil production, the people are neglected. In fact, many of their school leavers are unemployed and nothing is done to mitigate their condition. The MNOCs took advantage of the government resistance to the indigenes benefitting from the welfare package to infringe on the right of the people because different government functionaries are collaborators (Lewis, 2018; Ikuejube, 2018). The government at the centre and state levels always feel unconcerned and doing next to nothing to encourage the IOCs to attend to the environmental challenges of the Nigeria's Niger Delta. Over the years, the oil-



bearing communities in the Niger Delta region have experienced a series of devastating oil spills occasioned by industrial activities related to the extraction, exploration and transportation of oil and gas (The Punch, 2024).

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

This paper has examined the environmental and ecological challenges occasioned by oil exploration, exploitation and transportation in the oil-producing communities of Nigeria's Niger Delta. The paper argues that much of the anger against IOCs in the host communities arose out of the way the indigenes lost their farmlands, crops, economic trees, among others, with very little compensation. The neglect of these oil producing communities has often brought anger among the youths in the region, resulting into venting their anger on MNOCs, workers and vandalism of pipelines. Basic infrastructures such as roads, electricity, housing, water, education, among others, are barely developed relative to the abundant wealth of the region. In other words, development in the oil-bearing communities of the Niger Delta region is nothing to write home about. One greatest negative impact associated with the exploration and exploitation is environmental degradation. Federal Government's ownership of petroleum deposits has a lot of implications for the people of the Niger Delta. Government at the centre and state levels have been playing politics with the lives of the people of the region.

The oil-bearing communities in the Niger Delta must be empowered with the oil wealth. This will give them a sense of belonging and make them participate in the developmental process of the region. The argument of this paper is that the Federal Government must go beyond rent collection and making rules and regulation in the petroleum industry. More attention must be given to "compensation for disturbance of surface right," which has to do with compensation for property on land as distinct from land itself. There is need for proper consideration of oil producing communities as regards resource allocation and environmental protection. The IOCs must go beyond the provision of infrastructure such as electricity, boreholes, roads, among others, and focus more on human resource development (Aderoju & Akpati, 2023). IOCs operating in the region should be ready to extend their coverage to all communities in the Niger Delta by taking care of environmental degradation such as oil spillage, pollution and ecological challenges. Also, government at all levels should stop paying lip service and stop their nonchalant towards



environmental crisis in the Niger Delta. They need to embrace dialogue and communicate with the people of the region and give them the assurance of their support and mandate the MNOCs to address the environmental challenges of the Niger Delta. Indeed, government should demonstrate her political will and enforce stringent environmental laws with a view to regulating the environmental consequences of oil exploitation and exploration in Nigeria's Niger Delta region.

Finally, federalism as being presently practised in Nigeria is a deviation from, and non-conformity to the real tenets and ideals of a federation. What we are practising now in Nigeria could be best referred to as “pseudo-federalism” or “unitary federalism” which has led to overcentralisation (Aderoju, 2017; Ogbeide & Aghaowa, 2005; Osuya, 2005). This deviation is at the root of the contradictions that characterise the country. In fact, the Nigerian state violates the established principles of federalism such as fiscal federalism, resource control, state policing, among others, which rest on the free association of federating sovereign unit to forge a common destiny (The Punch, 2024). Agitation for resource control in the Niger Delta is a trump call on the need for the enthronement of true federalism in the nation's socio-political system. This is the practice in all countries that adopted federalism globally. Examples are the United States, Canada, Australia, Germany, the Netherlands, among others (The Punch, 2024). The Nigeria's political arrangement as espoused in the present constitution is a farce without true federalism. In other words, Nigeria needs a brand new and people-oriented constitution which will follow the full tenets and ideals of federalism as bequeathed to the country by the founding fathers in 1954 and in 1960 when the country gained nationhood from Britain. Each federating unit should be allowed to control and manage its own resources and pay certain percentage to the centre as was done in the First Republic (Aderoju & Akpati, 2023).

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