Environmental Conflict and the Politics of Oil in the Oil-Bearing Areas of Nigeria’s Niger Delta

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Abstract

Oil wealth enriches Nigeria, but it has not alleviated the poverty and deprivation in the oil-bearing areas of the Niger Delta. Oil-bearing areas have been exposed to ecological risks that have culminated in the violence characterizing the region. Literature has highlighted the consequences of oil exploitation, such as social tension culminating in violent communal crisis, youth restlessness, and oil-companies’ brutal repression. This study examines oil-related environmental externalities and oil-induced politics in the oil-bearing areas. Data were derived from interviews, Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and questionnaires. At present, the oil-bearing areas remain marginalized from the mainstream economic, social, and political activities in Nigeria. The Nigerian government’s top-down approach to the development of the oil-bearing areas has not been people-centred and participatory. Recommendations from this study include improved infrastructures, more equitable distribution of resources, improved local governance, effective conflict management mechanisms, and better environmental management.

Key words: Environmental degradation, Oil-induced Politics, Conflict, Oil-bearing Areas, Niger Delta, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

The oil-bearing areas of the Niger Delta have the largest mangrove forests in Africa and the third largest in the world. The inhabitants of the area derive a wide range of natural resources from the mangrove forest; including herbal medicine, fish, timber, and vital ecosystem services like stable soil and a flourishing habitat for a variety of wildlife, such as several endangered species, such as the Delta elephant, the white-crested monkey, and the river hippopotamus. In other words, the Niger Delta mangrove provides the means of sustenance to the people, who live largely on a subsistence basis. It also provides an important spawning habitat for Nigeria’s commercial fisheries.

However, the advent of oil production in the Niger Delta has led to deforestation and ecological degradation, threatening the renewable natural resources and the ecosystem services in a number of ways. The oil-bearing areas have faced so many environmental problems caused by pollution arising from oil activities such as drill cuttings, drilling mud, fluids used in production, chemicals injected to control corrosion or to separate oil from water, and general industrial waste. Added to this are problems of gas flaring and incidents of oil spills and blow outs (Aworawo, 1999). While spills inevitably accompany oil production, in Nigeria they occur with an alarming frequency and magnitude because most of the oil delivery infrastructure is obsolete and inadequate. Also, sabotage of pipelines is a persistent problem, and spills and pipelines leaks are poorly monitored and often not reported and repaired on time.

In addition, oil exploration and production are linked to poorly designed causeways and canals that the oil industry uses. These affect the hydrology of the seasonally flooded fresh water swamp and the brackish
water of the mangrove forest, killing crops, destroying fishing grounds and damaging the drinking water supply.

While it is evident that the environmental effects of oil production are great, it is important to point out that there are also some environmental problems not related to oil exploitation. The recent United Nations development report on the Niger Delta (UNDP, 2006) identified certain environmental problems that are not attributable to the oil industry activities, but rather a result of the natural terrain and hydrology of the Niger Delta. They are flooding, siltation, occlusion, erosion and the shortage of land for development. However, oil-related environmental effects compound and overshadow these others.

The Niger Delta region is a sensitive and fragile ecosystem. In spite of this vast resource endowment and its immense potential for socio-economic growth and contributions to the overall development of Nigeria, the oil-bearing areas within the Niger Delta remain under threat from rapidly deteriorating economic and environmental conditions as well as social tensions. Some critics suggest that the situation has worsened in recent years (ANEEJ, 2004). The perception of local people living in the oil communities is that the government is acting negligently, while the valuable ecosystems on which they depend for their livelihood are devastated by oil extraction. As a result, the situation degenerates into violence and this draws a disproportionate reaction from the government, deepening the people’s resentment and sense of alienation.

In spite of the damaging impact of oil exploitation on the environment and livelihoods of the host communities, scientific data on the overall and long-term effects of oil exploitation on the area are only beginning to emerge (HRW, 1999; Nwachukwu, 1999; Aluko, 1999; Okonta and Douglas, 2001; Ukeje et al., 2002; Onosode, 2003). Environmentalists and other experts have focused attention on the environmental degradation resulting from oil activities and a major bone of contention is the implication of the environmental impact on the livelihood of the people of the oil-bearing areas of the Niger Delta.

The importance of environmental sustainability cannot be overemphasized. This is fundamental to the people’s welfare and development as their existence to a large extent relies on subsistence endeavours, which depend on natural resources. While there have been many intricate poverty strategies that have been designed and implemented in the Niger Delta region, and while all these schemes have their own validity depending on the environment, the stark reality in the oil-bearing areas is that decades of these schemes and programmes have not mitigated the crucial problems of exclusion and human deprivation.

As a result, more germane to the survival of the indigenous people is the danger of oil exploitation obliterating their source of livelihood since they rely solely on their immediate environment for survival. Hence, anything that alters their environment threatens their very existence. Oil exploitation has created life-threatening ecological hazards and deterioration of health and social fabrics of the inhabitants of the oil-affected communities. The implication is that the oil industry has exploited the ecosystems for resources beyond the level of sustainability (Ashton-Jones and Douglas). The ecological problem is a reality that has to be tackled. This will reduce the vicious cycle of poverty and prevent the endemic social conflict that has pervaded the oil-bearing areas of the Niger Delta.

Subsequent sections examine the specific environmental effect of oil exploitation, analyse the politics of oil in oil-bearing areas of the Ondo state and proffer policy options for environmental sustainability and effective conflict management in the Niger Delta. The analysis was derived from survey questionnaires, interviews, FGDs sessions and participant observations.

**OIL-RELATED ENVIRONMENTAL EXTERNALITIES IN THE OIL-BEARING AREAS**

The specific environmental effect of oil exploitation on the oil-bearing areas is examined in this section in order to determine the extent of the impact on the people’s capacities to generate and sustain their means of livelihood. The analysis shows that oil-bearing areas in the Niger Delta are facing severe ecological
devastation, in other words, that the environmental effect is negative. The oil industry activities that affected the environment of the host communities are examined in greater details.

Oil Spillage

Oil spillage is the most common and controversial of all the environmental impacts of oil exploitation. Constitutional Rights Project (CRP, 1999) defines oil spills as uncontrolled releases of any product relating to oil production including crude oil, chemicals, or waste caused by equipment failure, operation mishaps, human error, or intentional damage to facilities. Oil spillage occurs during the drilling of oil wells and as a result of oil pipelines leakages and during the loading of oil into the tankers (Adewuyi, 2001). Spills are potentially the most devastating on agricultural land and water resources.

UNDP (2006) reports that much of the environmental pollution in the oil-bearing areas is the result of oil spillage due, essentially, to accidents based on human error and equipment failure. The report finds that a total of 6,817 oil spills occurred between 1976 and 2001, with a loss of approximately three million barrels of oil. More than 70 percent was not recovered. Approximately 6 percent spilled on land, 25 percent on swamps and 69 percent in the offshore environment. Statistics from the Ministry of Petroleum Resources also indicate that between 1976 and 1996, a total of 4,836 incidents resulted in the spillage of at least 2,446,322 barrels (102.7 million U.S gallons) of which an estimated 1,896,930 barrels (79.7 million U.S gallons) were lost to the environment. The extent of the impact on the study area where oil exploitation is largely offshore can best be imagined. Orubu et al. (2004) share this view when they reported that massive oil spills occurring in the riverine areas have done untold damage to the aquatic ecosystem, particularly in the mangrove swamp forest zone.

An average of one oil spill occurs every week and three oil spills are recorded each month in most of the oil-bearing areas of the Niger Delta, in which the proportion lost to the environment is quite disturbing (Awobajo, 1981). Thus, spills lead to the gradual poisoning of the water and the destruction of vegetation and agricultural lands. Oil companies usually attribute the cause of the oil spills to the deliberate action of sabotage, namely, wilful damage to facilities by the local people in protest against the operations of the oil companies. However, in reality, the cause may be due to the use of decrepit pipelines, some reportedly over 40 years old, which criss-cross oil communities. These pipelines are rusty, obsolete, and poorly maintained. Consequently, on-site oil leaks and ruptured pipelines are a serious problem in the Niger Delta.

In addition, oil spills and pipeline fires are regular features and official estimates are that there are at least 300 incidents each year. Clearing of oil spillages is not properly carried out; in most cases, the remaining crude oil is set on fire in which case forests and rivers are set ablaze. Oil spillage has exposed local people to severe hardship, poisoned the land, and polluted water bodies because once a spill occurs, it spreads all over the area, damaging the water and killing aquatic life. In other words, spills and leaks not only pollute groundwater sources and destroy agricultural lands and fisheries, they also pose an immediate threat to human life. HRW (1999) examine the long-term effect of oil spillage, which caused major pollution and stated that while the estimated safe lifespan of a pipeline is fifteen years, in numerous places in the Niger Delta, pipelines aged twenty or twenty-five years can be found.

Mobil’s Idaho blows in January 1999 resulted in the spilling of 40,000 barrels of oil. Although it was considered small, the spill spread from the immediate environment in Akwa-Ibom State to Rivers, Cross-Rivers, Edo, Delta and Ondo States. It even spread 85 kilometres into the Atlantic Ocean, going as far as Benin, Togo, and Ghana (Aworawo, 1999).

Field observations revealed sites of oil spillage in certain communities, which turned the water brackish in colour. Generally, the people complained about the negative environmental effect arising from the incidence of oil spillage. The long-term environmental effect as highlighted by the local communities ranged from the depletion of aquatic or groundwater resources to the destruction of forests and mangrove swamps. The people also complained about the devastating impact of spills on all the communities.
According to one community leader, an oil spill that occurred on 1st August, 2004 at Chevron’s Ewan oil field spread to several neighbouring oil-bearing communities of Igo, Awoye, Odun-Oyinbo, Ubale Kekere, Ogungbeje, and Yoren, destroying fishing grounds, the major source of income for the people. However, the main cause of the spill could not be ascertained. Incessant oil spills have always been a source of agitation and concern in the oil-bearing areas.

**Gas Flaring**

Gas flaring is another major effect of oil exploitation on the environment of the oil-bearing areas and generates air pollution and heat. Gas flaring is the deliberate burning of natural gas that is produced in the Niger Delta, it creates a ceaseless, high intensity flame. Natural gas is a by-product of oil extraction, which is removed from the earth crust along with the crude oil. The World Bank (1995) shows that gas flaring has been known to be the singular highest contributor to the problem of global warming or global climate change. In the same vein, Orubu (1999) adds that that greenhouse gases such as methane and carbon dioxide emitted from gas flares contribute to global warming, which could lead to a rise in sea level, accelerate the problem of climatic change and harsh living conditions on earth if not checked. It also has negative effects on the immediate environment as it adversely affects plant growth, wildlife, and human beings. It has been estimated that the total emission of carbon dioxide (CO2) from gas flaring in Nigeria amounts to about 35 million tons per year and it is on record that Nigeria flares the highest amount of gas in the world (World Bank, 1995, 2000/2001). The percentage of gas flared in Nigeria, which is about three times the OPEC average, is about 16 times the world average (Ajayi and Ikorukpo, 2005).

Compounding the people’s plight is the close proximity of gas flares to residential areas, forests, and waterways, thereby making living unbearable to human beings, terrestrial and aquatic animals. At the mouth of the canal, from which the open sea is visible from the Awoye community, the distant gas flare illuminates Chevron’s Parabe platform, which is nine kilometres away, and the Ewan platform about two kilometres. A study of gas flaring in South-Eastern Nigeria by Isiche and Sanford (1976) found that at the global level, flaring in Nigeria contributes a measurable percentage of the world’s total emissions of greenhouse gases. Specifically, due to the low efficiency of many of the flares, much of the gas is released as methane (which has a high warming potential) rather than carbon dioxide. At the local level, the low-lying Niger Delta is particularly vulnerable to the potential effects of sea level rising. Further, air and leaf temperatures increased up to eighty or one hundred meters from the stack, such that species compositions of vegetation are affected.

The most noticeable effect of the flares is light pollution. Across the oil-bearing areas, the night sky is lit up by flares, which during the rainy season reflect brightly from the clouds. It is difficult to differentiate between night and day because of the polluted air and burning light. Communities close to flares complain that the light disturbs nocturnal animals, driving them away from the area. The economic and health cost of heat emissions from the flares and destruction of vegetation are part of the negative externalities of the wasteful flaring of oil-associated gas. Indeed, gas flaring has been identified as the major cause of respiratory infection among the Niger Delta people, as well as the cause of reduced growth potentials of farm crops (Egwaikhide and Aregbeyen, 1999). Though economically sensible for the oil producers, flaring is environmentally destructive. Local communities have borne the brunt of the effects of the gas flares. The destructive impact of gas flares is succinctly expressed in the statement of one community youth leader who stated that the roofs of their houses have been severely corroded as a result of acid rain caused by gas flares, which also affects aquatic fauna leading to a reduction in fishery.

Ibeanu (2000) indicates that Nigeria exceeded the world average for natural gas flaring by seventy-two percent in 1991. In that year, while the world average for gas flared as a percentage of total production was four percent, Nigeria flared seventy-six percent of that total production. Flaring of gas in Nigeria for about 50 years has also been estimated to constitute a waste of 12.5 million dollars annually, an amount that would have been earned if the oil-associated natural gas was captured, sold, or used as a local energy source. However, the lack of delivery and utilization of infrastructures for natural gas in Nigeria render it a
useless by-product (Onosode, 2003).

Figure 1 indicates that Nigeria is not just number one; rather, it flares more gas than all the other eight countries put together. Although, with the gas utilization programme, the flare rate is said to have been reduced to about 54%, the proportion flared is still very significant in global terms. Okonta and Douglas (2001) corroborated this and identified the reason for the high rate of gas flares in Nigeria as multinationals involved in oil exploration and production activities in Nigeria flared more gases in the course of their operation than in any other countries where they are involved in oil activities. They suggest that these oil companies found it economically expedient to flare non-associated gas on site rather than incur the expenses of putting in place facilities to re-inject the gas back into the wells or to collect it for commercial use.

FIGURE ONE

Natural gas does not have to be flared off; and in many countries, as stated earlier, there is little flaring. Other options for managing natural gas include re-injection into the subsoil and storage for use as a source of energy by local communities and in other part of the country. Yet companies in the Niger Delta opt for flaring because even with the minimal five naira paid to the government for each barrel of gas flared, it is far cheaper than the alternative.

Drill Cuttings

Oil extraction and production lead to the contamination of streams and rivers through the discharge of various materials into the environment during drill cuttings and drilling mud and fluids used for stimulating production. The major constituents of drill cuttings, such as barite and bentonite clays, when dumped on the ground, prevent local plant growth until natural processes lead to the development of new topsoil. In water, these materials disperse and sink, thereby suffocating local bottom-living plants and animals by burying them (ANEEJ, 2004).

In addition, air pollution arises during drill cutting from the carbon dioxide discharged into the atmosphere as a result of the cracking of wells (Adewuyi, 2001). CRP (1999) identifies the chemicals and sludge generated in the oil production process to include oily residues, tank bottom sludge, and obsolete chemicals, which, if not properly treated and disposed of, carry high pollution and health risks. Van Dissel (1996), cited in HRW (1999) explains that waste also comes in the form of drilling water. Drilling for oil produces waste, largely mud, which in itself is relatively harmless, but when produced in large quantities can cause problems by changing the acidity or salinity levels of the soil and/or water and by increasing the turbidity of the water. Therefore, the physical environment is altered in the course of oil wells drilling and vegetation is destroyed.

Canalisation

Poorly designed causeways and canals, constructed to bring in heavy drilling equipment, affect the hydrology of the seasonally flooded fresh water swamps and the brackish water of the mangrove forest. Canals disrupt the delicate hydrological system, especially when they are constructed on the border zone between freshwater and brackish water in the riverine areas; as such, they can disrupt the viability of long-established fishing grounds.

In the study area, a canal dug by Chevron near one of the oil-bearing communities in Ilaje has reportedly caused accelerated erosion near the sea and has destroyed the local hydrological system by allowing saltwater into previous freshwater areas, thereby creating a saltwater marsh in place of much higher biodiversity freshwater swamp. Since the canalization of the area, salt water from the ocean has completely altered their ecosystem and endangered the community’s means of survival; specifically, the traditional fishing ground and source of drinking water have been wiped out. The Chairman of the Regional Development Council (RDC) of Chevron narrated this to the interviewer and identified some of the
environmental effects of Chevron activities on the oil-bearing areas. He could not, however, point to measures taken by Chevron to address this negative environmental impact. Findings seem to indicate that the oil-bearing areas are left to bear the negative environmental impact without any support from the oil companies. However, these artificial canals not only allow saline waters of the Atlantic into freshwater sources, they also lead to the scarcity of drinking water and kill many species of plants, animals and fishes. Their construction has precipitously altered the entire ecosystem, as freshwater is destroyed (Onosode, 2003).

**Dredging**

This is another environmental effect of oil exploitation in the oil-bearing areas. Dredging destroys the ecology of the dredged area where the spoils are dumped. Although dredged material is, in principle, dumped on land, some of it inevitably washes back into the water, thereby increasing its turbidity and reducing sunlight penetration, which affects plant life and kills fish in the creeks and rivers. Dredged materials in mangrove areas turns acidic once exposed to oxygen and silt dredged as a result of canalization and dumped on cultivated leaves can decrease farm yields.

**Coastal Erosion**

Coastal erosion affects artificially all the oil-bearing areas of the Niger Delta bordering the Atlantic Ocean. The Ilaje oil-bearing areas are no exception. UNDP (2006) attributed this erosion as partly the result of rising sea levels and strong tidal wave current. Oil and gas activities have also contributed to the increasing menace of erosion through the construction of canals, shore crossing, pipelines, jetties, and moles. The sea waves break on the shore; land is erodes and washes into the sea. Coastal erosion has become a constant threat to many oil-bearing communities of Ilaje beginning as far back as 1988. *The African Guardian*, reports that erosion has laid waste to some coastal communities such as Awoye, Ojumole, Umohuma, Ikorigbo, Jirinwo, Molutehin and Ogungbeje (The African Guardian, January, 1988).

In recent times, Chevron’s seismic activities have left the oil-bearing areas porous, leading to the threat of sea incursion. Awoye and Ayetoro are seriously threatened by sea incursion. In Awoye, for instance, the earliest site, is now some two kilometres into the ocean, an indication that the community is threatened by tidal incursion.

One coastal community leader lamented the hardships faced as a result of tidal incursion. According to him, since Chevron, formerly Gulf Oil, started operation in Ilaje, the riverbed has turned to rivers and sea incursion has become a constant threat. As a result of the encroachment of the ocean, for example, one coastal community is now found at its 6th relocation site. In the case of another coastal town, which until recently comprised a convergence of fishermen and women whose trade attracted patrons from the upland and beyond, sea incursion is a reality that threatens their continued existence. A respondent for one of the FGD sessions at a coastal settlement vividly narrated the hardship the tidal incursion caused the people, stating that, when the powerful tide began encroaching, people were confronted with the reality of tidal incursion and were so afraid that they stayed indoors for days until the waves abated. As a result, all economic and social activities ground to a halt.

In addition, focus group discussion sessions in one coastal community indicate that about 15 years ago, the sea was some 200–400 meters away from the community, unlike the situation now, where the sea is uncomfortably close. Members of that discussion were unanimous in their assertion that the sea incursion is caused by oil industry activities. Prior to oil exploitation, the community only felt the impact of high tide on the sands; the tide did not encroach on the community. They complained that the government has not addressed the problem, even after sending an emissary to them. Although the government gave the contract for the building of an embankment to an indigenous company about three years ago, nothing concrete has been achieved to date. Sea incursion has led to the displacement of the people who are rendered homeless.
while their economic activities have been paralyzed.

**Effluent and Waste from Oil Refineries**

The discharge of refinery effluents into freshwater sources and farmland devastate the environment and threaten human lives. Such effluents contain excessive quantities of toxic materials like mercury and chromium. For instance, fish can store mercury in their brains for a long time and can easily pass this into the human food chain when consumed resulting in adverse effects on human population. Recent studies conducted by the environment group, Environmental Rights Action (ERA, 2000), on some oil-bearing communities revealed that most of the underground aquifers are heavily contaminated with a cocktail of dangerous metal and chemicals.

Crude oil contains thousands of different chemicals, many of which are toxic and are known to be carcinogenic with no determined safe threshold for human exposure (HRW, 1999). Further, materials such as metals, glass, plastic, and crates used by the oil companies, which are later thrown away, have a negative effect on the people and environment. Atmospheric contaminants from refinery operations, such as oxide of nitrogen, carbon, and sulphur have been found to constitute major waste sources. Lubrication oils and other wastes in the form of sludge, bitumen, slope, and oil, sand, or sediment are present in large quantities within the oil flow stations, storage terminals and tanks (Nwakwo and Ifeadi, 1988). Chemical wastes are continuously dumped into the waterways, although the oil companies claim to technically reduce the toxicity of their wastes and properly get rid of them. In one community, the people showed the researcher sites of oil wastes in the water by the riverbanks, which has turned blackish and emits odour. Gberesu (1989) opines that a high rate of disposal of fluids from the petroleum industry into the river is responsible for the increased floods experienced in the Niger Delta because the disposal has increased the viscosity of the river thereby reducing velocity.

Oil companies usually discharge production water, already contaminated with oil, directly into the surrounding creeks and rivers without adequate treatment. Sludge and other lethal chemicals removed from the bottom of storage tanks in the course of maintenance activities are disposed of in the same way (Okonta and Douglas, 2001). Oil leaks from storage tanks and equipment are also a regular phenomenon and these, combined with hydrocarbon vapour released and evaporated directly from the tanks themselves, have subjected the soil, rivers, and creeks in the vicinity of the oil terminals to slow but relentless devastation.

However, evidence indicates that even though the Nigerian government and oil companies are aware of these negative environmental effects of oil exploitation, they have not made any concerted effort to control the adverse effects of oil extraction, production, and distribution activities on the environment of the host communities.

**THE POLITICS OF OIL IN THE OIL-BEARING AREAS**

Political dislocation in the oil-bearing areas has been primarily the result of oil industry activities. It has been argued that oil companies operating in the Niger Delta have played a very significant role in the collapse of values and systems in the Niger Delta through an adverse reshaping of the local political landscape and the introduction of corrupt and divisive community relation policies reminiscent of the divide and rule tactics of colonial Nigeria (Imobighe, 2004).

Findings reveal that oil-related activities have brought with them the politics of oil and that this has ignited and exacerbated oil related conflicts in the oil-bearing areas. These conflicts are multi-dimensional. The communal conflicts can take the form of conflict within a community, conflict between communities, and conflict between host communities and the oil companies. The intra- and inter-communal conflict is usually oil-induced. The presence of oil has exacerbated political disputes over territory or other rights. While territorial disputes in the area predate the discovery of oil. For instance, the Ugbo and Mahin-Ilaje
conflicts during the British rule led to the deportation of the traditional ruler of Ugbo-Ilaje by the British imperial ruler (Curmen, 1937). However, since the discovery and commercial exploitation of oil, many of the conflicts between communities in the area are fuelled by the presence of oil. A case in point is bloody conflict of 1998 between the Arogbo-Ijaw and the Ugbo-Ilaje, which was attributed to the presence of oil in a boundary town between the two ethnic groups (Albert, 2001). Even though the oil industry is blamed for a range of ills and for not doing enough for the areas where they operate, communities are also aware of the potential benefits of having oil pipelines travel through their land or the presence of a flow station and the opportunities for compensation payments and contracts that will result, even if the compensation only reaches a few. Therefore, disputes between communities, which may have been latent can be stirred up by the suggestion that an oil installation is planned as well as damage caused by oil pollution.

Another revelation during FGDs session is the issue of divide and rule tactics of oil companies. Focus group discussions showed that the oil companies use the award of contracts or development projects to deliberately divide communities and thus dominate them without serious challenge to their operation. Whatever the intentions of the oil companies, division and conflict within and between communities often results from, or is exacerbated, by their presence.

Field observation also shows that the politics of oil in the study areas involve only a few, elite, segments of these communities. The elite have profited immensely from the oil companies and the wealth they have amassed is used to control the political behaviour of the larger majority. These elite are usually the traditional rulers and community leaders in these communities. They have become rich from the spoils of oil at the expense of other members of the communities. The elite are prepared to tolerate the inconveniences of oil company presence in terms of environmental pollution in as much as oil companies reward them. Oil money that flows into the hands of these local elites, after taking their share, are passed on to their supporters. These people have lost a voice against the activities of the oil companies because of the financial gain derived from the oil industry. Respect for these elites has broken down in most of the oil-bearing areas of the Niger Delta. The government is also fingered as culprit in the spoils of oil. This assertion was vividly captured in a statement made by one community member participating in a focus group discussion:

The community representatives who are very close to the oil companies negotiate on behalf of the community and collect compensations from oil companies that are less than the community entitlement. For instance, if the community is entitled to N100 million as compensation, they may collect N20 million instead. The government is also culpable of this practice. They negotiate on behalf of the community without our knowledge.

Oil-related activities have increased the people’s level of participation in local politics. Since these elites are politicians, being a member of their parties implies that the benefit accruing to them from oil activities will trickle down to their supporters. As such, active participation in party politics, as field observation revealed, is a major factor determining whether a person would benefit from the spoils of oil given to the elite. There is, therefore, a clear financial incentive to political activity, which has negatively impacted on the attitude of the youth toward productive enterprises, especially with regard to fishing and other traditional economic ventures.

Compensation payment has been a major issue in the politics of oil in the study area. The traditional leaders who were responsible for the collection of compensation have been accused of embezzling a large portion of the money designated for the affected community. These have affected the traditional authority of these rulers. Specifically, oil-related activities have led to the emergence of more kingdoms and kings, most of whose legitimacy is contentious. As a result of the crisis that the issue of compensation has generated, youth organizations are now responsible for the collection of compensation on behalf of communities instead of the traditional rulers. The traditional rulers, however, still derive benefits from the oil companies. The general view obtained from interviews and FGD sessions is that traditional rulers are still accorded respect because the Yoruba culture dictates respect for elders. This perception of reverence for traditional

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authority was further reinforced in the assertion of one youth leader: 

Whatever the shortcoming of our traditional leaders, we cannot disobey them outright, as our culture dictates respect for elders. Also, our traditional beliefs exert repercussions for disobedience to traditional authority. As a result, traditional leaders weigh power on their subject.

As inferred from the available data, traditional rulers still exert control over their subjects. The modicum of peace experienced in the study area is attributed to the control these leaders have over their people. They are able to rein in youth when they intervene in disputes between youth and the oil companies. As shown in Table 1, three survey questions supported the findings on the state of traditional institutions.

TABLE ONE

An analysis of the three sampled questions supports the observation made regarding the traditional institutions. Responses to these questions attest to the diminished respect and honour accorded the traditional leaders. Responding to the first question, 90 (30%) of the respondents claimed that oil-related activities have not affected the respect and honour accorded traditional rulers, 144 (48%) believed otherwise, and 66 (22%) did not answer the question. This may be interpreted to indicate that the self-seeking attitude of the traditional leaders accounts for the decline in their status. In the case of question two, observation data indicated that 216 (72%) confirmed that the traditional leaders have the final say in any oil-related issue affecting the community, 30 (10%) disagreed, and 54 (18%) did not respond. The high percentage of people answering ‘yes’ could be attributed to the culture and belief system of the people, which imposes penalties for outright disobedience to these leaders. With respect to the last question, 60 (20%) believed that the traditional rulers are fighting for the interest of the community, 192 (64%) disagreed, and 48 (16%) were neutral. The high percentage of people answering ‘no’ would indicate that the majority of the people perceive the traditional leaders to be illegitimate representatives of their people, and shows that they are more concerned with the monetary benefit leaders receive from the oil companies, even when it may be detrimental to the welfare of their people.

The statistical analysis of the political effects of oil exploitation on the oil-bearing areas, using Pearson’s chi-square test and shown in Table 2, indicates that there is a significant difference in the political regime as a result of the oil industry’s activities. Data generated from the survey questionnaire on the perception of the respondents on the effect of oil exploitation on their political life were utilized. The table shows that Pearson’s chi-square value ($x^2$) is 5.71 at the first degree of freedom (df) and the significance levels for 2-tail and 1-tail tests are 0.04 and 0.04, respectively. This implies that the results are statistically significant.

TABLE TWO

Based on these results, the hypothesis that there is a significant relationship between oil exploitation and shifts in the political regime of the oil-bearing areas is accepted. In other words, this study suggests that oil-related activities have negatively affected political conditions in the oil-bearing areas, as well as the local environment.

CONCLUSION

The oil-bearing area of the Niger Delta is the richest parts of Nigeria in terms of natural resources endowment. The area has large oil and gas deposits, as well as extensive forests, good agricultural land, and abundant aquatic resources. However, the oil communities of Ilaje, like other Niger Delta communities, remain marginalized from mainstream environmental, economic, social, and political activities in Nigeria. The government, both Federal and State, has failed to consider the interests and human rights of the grassroots producing areas. Rather, the government continues to exclude the people and their voices in the effort to develop the country. The government lacks the political will to enact and enforce stringent environmental laws to regulate the environmental consequences of crude oil exploitation in the Niger Delta. As a result of this grave negligence on the part of the government, oil companies continue the destruction
of the ecosystem of the Niger Delta region.

The people’s efforts to achieve economic and ecological sustainability are being severely threatened. They fear that they will have to move to another location or face extinction in a land so negatively affected by the oil companies, such that it can no longer support them as it once supported their ancestors. In spite of the area’s abundant natural resources, the potential for development remains unfulfilled and threatened by environmental devastation and worsening economic, social, and political conditions.

In addition to the negative impact on local communities’ economies, environmental pollution and degradation, and lack of access to assets including basic education, clean water, a diversified economy, and healthcare delivery—that hold the keys to unlocking poverty’s grip—are other forms of human deprivation. Therefore, in the Niger Delta, marginalization and exclusion from the ownership of assets and lack of access to social amenities define poverty. It is only if and when development strategies address these factors holistically that the possibility of alleviating poverty and reducing vulnerability exists. There should be a people-centred development agenda founded in the region’s natural and human capital.

The people of the oil-bearing areas can no longer endure the gross social infrastructural neglect, poverty, ecological catastrophes, and other deprivations they face despite their contribution to the development of Nigeria. Their response to the apparent failure or inability of successive Nigerian governments to protect the land and people from the hazards of hydrocarbon activities such as pollution, oil spillages, incessant gas flaring, human right violations, and subsequent economic deprivation and impoverishment lies in the clamour for resource control. The people of the Niger Delta region strongly believe that the only way their developmental needs can be met is for them to regain ownership, control, and management of their oil resources.

Against this backdrop, the special circumstances in which the people of the oil-bearing areas find themselves require programmes that recognize that poverty eradication and successful rural development depend on the involvement of local communities. There must be a strong focus on strengthening grassroots organizations and on making resources available for community development activities. The programme for addressing rural poverty must identify and target the most vulnerable, empowering them to participate effectively in development activities.

The government, in concert with oil-bearing communities and other stakeholders, should undertake a comprehensive environmental survey of the Niger Delta in order to establish the causes of ecological and socio-economic change over time, and, accordingly, induce corrective action by encouraging relevant stakeholders to address specific environmental and related socio-economic problems in order to improve the quality of life of the people and achieve more equitable development in the oil-bearing areas of the Niger Delta region.

All available evidence suggests that oil companies’ destruction of the Niger Delta is informed by near total disregard for the welfare of the local people. Why should these multinationals go to great length to conduct rigorous and extensive environmental impact assessment (EIA) for their operations in Europe and North America and refuse to do same in the Niger Delta? Clearly, what is good for the former countries is not considered necessary or desirable for the communities of the Niger Delta, from whose land these oil companies have extracted billions of dollars worth of oil since 1958.

Oil companies are obliged to adopt all practicable precautions including the provision of up-to-date equipment to prevent pollution and must take “prompt” steps to control and, if possible, mitigate pollution if and when it does occur. They must maintain all installations in good repair and condition in order to prevent the escape or avoidable waste of petroleum. Oil companies can also establish ancillary oil-related industries in the oil-producing communities to absorb the army of unemployed graduates.

Environmental conservation issues that have to be prioritized and tackled in the Niger Delta include agricultural land degradation, flooding, fisheries depletion, deforestation, biodiversity loss, water hyacinth...
proliferation, toxic and hazardous wastes, oil spillage and pollution, sewage disposal, and solid waste disposal. Therefore, in order to halt the continual degradation of the Niger Delta environment, the federal government of Nigeria must play a leading role by enacting and enforcing stringent environmental laws that will protect the oil-bearing areas, as well as guaranteeing the people an improved livelihood. Deliberate intervention policies must be implemented speedily to begin massive infrastructural development of the Niger Delta, as well as address the crushing level of poverty among the people of the Niger Delta.

The challenge for the Nigerian government, both federal and state, is to construct and implement enduring policies that recognize the imperative of enhancing the quality of the environment. The government should adopt policies to improve the standard of living and quality of life of rural poor people in the Niger Delta, especially women and young people. A major concern is to reduce current tension and conflict by improving employment opportunities for young people and channelling their energies into the development of sustainable livelihoods and natural resources management activities. The government should also ensure active participation of local people in development activities.

Finally, Nigeria needs to change the distribution of oil revenue in order to reverse poverty in the Niger Delta, a region that has seen few gains from the nation’s 50 years of oil production. There should be improved physical and social infrastructure, more equitable distribution of resources, improved local governance, effective conflict management mechanisms, and better environmental management. The situation in the Niger Delta calls for a very serious environmental, political, social, economic, cultural, and spiritual engineering, based on the needs and voices of affected communities, to rehabilitate the people and the land.

REFERENCE


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