

## Politics of Energy Exploitation and Environmental Degradation in the Niger-Delta Region of Nigeria

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### Abstract

This paper attempts to x-ray some of the possible consequences of oil spills, bunkering activities, drilling mud, pipeline vandalization and militancy on the ecological resources of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria due to the roles some political agents such as the government, the multi-national oil companies and the pro-environmental groups are playing in the exploitation of petroleum and gas resources in Nigeria. Possible suggestions as a way forward to environmental degradation in the Niger Delta Region were suggested. These include the provision of an adequate institutional framework, proper Environmental Impacts Assessment/Social Impact Assessment, before any developmental project can be carried out. Detail environmental audit, monitoring as well as adhering to the world environmental standard would save the region from the danger of environmental degradation.

**Keywords:** Politics; Energy exploitation; Environment degradation; Land degradation

### Introduction

The present state of environmental degradation in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria can be likened to that of a sick patient who is at a state of terminal point. His situation according to medical parlance has become critical. His breath (The terrestrial atmosphere) has become noxious, his sweats and fumes are becoming poisonous to lives and properties (other substances released into the environment by ways of spills and bye products). There is therefore an urgent need for attention. Man's quest to satisfy his basic need of shelter, food and clothing has blinded him; he does not seem to understand the facts that the earth's resources is naturally knitted into a web of systems needed to be understood and used in a sustainable way so as to maintain its existing state of equilibrium. As a geomorphic agent, man alters the existing landscape to suit his purpose; through dredging, construction, mining, drilling, sand-filling, farming and manufacturing, man has succeeded in displacing the existing biogeochemical cycles of nature-exposing the environment to the ills of degradation. The first commercial oil well was discovered in 1956 at Oloibiri in present Ogbia local government of Bayelsa State in the Niger Delta region (Figure 1). This discovery opened up the oil industry in 1961 in Nigeria, bringing more oil firms like the Agip, Mobil, Safrap (now Elf), Texaco and Chevron to petroleum prospecting both in on shore/offshore areas of Nigeria [1]. Between 1956 and 1958, more oil fields were discovered at Afam, Bonu, Ebubu and Later Ugheli and Kokori and the production capacity steadily rise. By this period, oil has become so prominent that the search for more of it had intensified in various communities in the region. Ironically, this was the genesis of the series of problems which have bedeviled the region in recent times. The emergence of oil industry did not only undetermine the Agricultural sector which was the mainstay of the local economy and create serious environmental hazards for the people through exploration, exploitation and transportation of oil and gas; it equally created serious value problem as the hitherto cherished traditional value-system were weakened by the emergence of the petrodollar related behavior.

Paradoxically, the Niger Delta remains the poorest region as earlier stated, due to the ecologically unfriendly exploitation of oil and gas and state policies that expropriate the indigenous people of the Niger Delta, of their rights to these natural resources. The Niger Delta environment is not developed to further sustain the people after the destruction

of the ecosystem that had kept the people together. The height of it is that the environmental degradation continuously occur through oil exploration activities such as gas flaring, oil spills, canalization to oil fields, seismic explosives detonation etc. thereby creating artificial challenges to development but the region is not considered for holistic development, rather the concepts of wider, national and internal power struggle to control meager funds for the development of the Niger Delta are always been politicized. It is the dynamics of this interconnectedness and probable solutions to the problems causing the challenges of development despite the huge oil revenue from the area; that this research is intending to explore. This research is aim at investigate oil exploitation and challenges of development in the Niger Delta region. The research will identified if there is any relationship between crude oil exploration and the poverty level of oil bearing communities and also to examine whether oil proceeds had not improved infrastructural needs of the Niger Delta and the effects of crises on oil production in Nigeria (Table 1).

The hypothesis of this paper are:

The activities of oil prospecting companies appear to improve the incidence of inequality in the Niger Delta Region.

The oil exploitation in the Niger Delta has not translated to improvement in infrastructural facilities.

### Methodology

#### Study area

The Niger Delta region is situated in the south-south region of Nigeria comprising of six states in their geo-political zone. This flood

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Figure 1: Oloibiri oil well (first oil well in Nigeria).

Year	1980	1985	1992	1996	2004
Edo/Delta	19.8	52.4	33.9	56.1	Delta 45.3 Edo 33.09
Cross River	10.2	41.9	45.5	66.9	41.61
Imo/Abia	14.4	33.1	49.9	56.2	Imo 27.39 Abia 22.27
Ondo	24.9	47.3	46.6	71.6	41.15
Rivers/Bayelsa	7.2	44.4	43.4	44.3	Rivers 29.09 Bayelsa 19.98

Table 1: Incidence of poverty in the Niger Delta, 1980-2004.

plain is home to over seven million people, grouped into several nations or ethnic groups: the Ijaws, Urhorobo, Itsekiri, Isoko, Efik, Etche, Ibibio, Andoni, Ikwere, Ogoni, Edo and Kwale-Igbo. The bulk of these groups inhabit the core of the deltaic area which is spread over six states in the present day Nigeria namely: Cross River, Akwa-Ibom, Rivers, Bayelsa, Delta and Edo state respectively.

The people of the Niger Delta occupies the vast wetlands lying below sea level with several rivers, creeks, lakes, streams, high/low lands, seas and confluences. Several rivers and creeks flow into one another in a web-like formation in the extreme south of Nigeria. It is a large basin locked up in land with several openings known as estuaries to the Atlantic ocean. These estuaries act as funnels, as they bring ocean waters that are saline in nature that mixes with the fresh waters from the hinterland. Both meet in several large confluences where a natural change takes place, thereby resulting in the formation of a "tidal" system. Environmental survey put the political Niger Delta at 70,000km<sup>2</sup>. Nevertheless, the geographical or actual Niger Delta is 25,640km, which is approximately one-thirty sixth of the total area of Nigeria [2]. The 2006 population census put the population of the region at 31,224,577 million, thus accounting for almost a quarter of Nigeria's population.

### Oil exploration and the resultant effects on the environment

In broad sense, the Niger Delta environment has been exposed to vulnerability as a result of oil exploration activities in the region. Vulnerability is a set of conditions and processes resulting from physical, social, economic and environmental factors, which determines the susceptibility of a community to the impact of hazards [3]. Environmental degradations leading to vulnerability assessments forms on identification of all possible physical, social, economic and environmental factors that are occupying the Niger Delta as a result of both natural and anthropogenic transformations which include: exploitation of natural resources (especially crude oil) urbanization, industrial development, afforestation among others. These negative trends are not just exposing the dedicate ecosystem of the Niger

Delta to harsh climate variability but are also Deeping the regions vulnerability to natural disasters. Since the mid 1980's, when oil overtly displayed traditional economic activities in the Niger Delta, the region has witnessed phenomenal growth in urbanization with attendant implications for the resilience of the environment. The rise of oil cities and oil jobs in the region have generated mass migration, urban sprawl, slum housing, traffic congestion and increased human and industrial pressure on already tenuous situation.

### Oil spillage

Oil spill is the accidental, natural or deliberate discharge of crude oil or oil products on land, lakes, ponds, creeks, streams, rivers and sea during drilling and transportation of crude oil by the multinational oil companies. The problem of oil spill is another major devastating environmental hazard associated with the oil industry in the Niger Delta. The U S. Department of energy estimates that over 4,000 oil spills discharging more than two million barrels of crude oil have occurred in the Niger Delta since 1960 [4]. In specific records, there were 1600 cases of oil spills resulting in the release of over 1.678 million barrels of oil into the environment in 1970-88 periods. Also there were 45 cases of oil spills in 1993. Oil spills do occur both in onshore and offshore as a result of; Equipment failure, Accidents, Deliberate human action, Natural hazards etc. Oil spills had over the years created the following negative effects on the Niger Delta environment; Biological effects, Pathological/ecological effects, Specific marine habitats, Open water and seabed effects, Shorelines effects, Wetlands effects, Mangrove/corals effects and Air pollution effects [5]. Oil spills input data is below presented in a table for the years 1976-1986 (Table 2), then a looming oil spills projection and prediction were also put in place as an extrapolate from the available data of 1976-1986 using the moving average for another table for the years 1987-2000 (Table 3).

Since the discovery of petroleum in Oloibiri-The "Black Gold" as it is often called has become the pivot of Nigerian economy (Figure 2). About 90 percent of the country's foreign exchange revenue is derived from petroleum exportation. Ironically, Nigeria is the 6<sup>th</sup> world producer of

YEAR	NO	QUANTITY (BBLs)	QUANTITY RECOVERED (BBLs)	NET QUANTITY (BBLs)
1976	128	26,157	7,136	20,023
1977	104	32,879	1,703	31,144
1978	154	489,295	391,445	973
1979	157	694,295	63,417	41,271
1981	238	42,723	5,470	37,371
1982	257	42,841	2,171	46,386
1983	173	48,351	6,345	33,853
1984	151	40,209	1,645	98,100
1985	187	11,877	1,719	10,157
1986	215	58,102	11,451	46,651
Σ	205	2,038,710	534,995	339,336

Net volume evaporated and others: 1,164, 382 bbls

Table 2: Oil spill input data in Nigeria 1976-1986.

YEAR	Number of Oil Spill	Quantity Spilled (Bbls)	Quantity Recovered (Bbls)	Net Volume to the Aquatic Environment (Bbls)
1987	182	185,337	48,636	30,848
1988	187	199,808	57,018	31,833
1989	194	214,984	26,616	31,895
1990	198	190,046	23,264	34,706
1991	202	144,222	21,523	32,097
1992	198	102,741	22,983	31,363
1993	195	108,197	22,602	30,708
1994	189	114,149	24,079	29,288
1995	191	120,131	26,118	28,868
1996	194	127,396	28,336	30,755
1997	195	137,898	29,871	32,628
1998	193	129,191	28,166	31,353
1999	194	129,191	25,542	31,399
2000	195	122,771	25,444	31,360
Σ	2707	1,901,679	410,199	439,003

Table 3: Predicted oil spill data in Nigeria 1987-2000.

crude oil (Figure 3). The country is rated the 20<sup>th</sup> poorest nation in the world. Only about ten percent of the rural household and forty percent of the entire population has access to a facility as basic as electricity. But if the country is reaping from the deposits of oil and gas in the Niger Delta, must the people continue to reap a curious mixture of ecological damage to soil, water, and vegetation?. Another constant for these people-Ogonis, Efiks, Ibibio, Ijaws, is the avarice, violent and ethnic clashes that are borne out of the people's discontent with the perceived inequalities in the running and management of petroleum resources. Most importantly is the loss of livelihood, which the people suffered as a result of the continuing and extensive damage to soil and water.

### Oil host communities and infrastructural neglect

Over 95% of the people live in small rural settlements with less than 5000, in population. About 85% of this rural population depends on informal enterprises such as fishing, canoe carving, subsistence Agriculture, blacksmithing, etc. as their primary source of livelihood. The oil industry has impacted negatively on them. Similarly these rural communities lack basic infrastructural amenities. The social services here are grossly deplorable, inadequate and absent in most cases, hence, encouraging the drift of their youths to urban centers. Adedipe [6] maintained that, in exploring and exploiting the natural resources to serve us, there is obvious paradox evidence in the need to ensure economic development while protecting the environment. This is because development is characteristically hinged on industrialization which in turn, inevitably negatively impacts the environment. In other words, whatever we do and whichever way we engage in the exploration

and exploitation of energy resources, there is bound to be some form of decline in environmental quality. Be it as it may, the important decision is a national orientation for a commitment that such a paradox must be resolved at all times. Protecting the environment gives us consistently useful output overtime-hence the need for the adoption of the principle of sustainable development which is simply development without jeopardizing future development.

It is important to note that the multi-national oil companies maintain a steady policy of double standards in their operation. For instance, Oyinda [7] reported that shell in its process of planting pipelines from Stan-low in Cheshire to Moss Moran in Scotland, seventeen different environmental surveys were conducted before any turf was cut. Detailed Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) also covers every measure of the route. Surprisingly, of all the spills recorded from shell, which operate in over 100 countries of the world, 40 percent occurred in Nigeria. Nigeria also has the highest record for gas flaring in the world. In Chevron offshore fields Okan production Platform, Meren production platform, Opolo production platform, Ewan production platform, Parabe production platform etc. Gas flaring is still going on till date even with the completion of EGTL and NLNG-Excavos and Port-Harcourt respectively as well as Shell, Mobil and other production platforms.

In the developed countries, these oil companies maintained some Modicum of respect for the environment no matter how fraudulent. For instance, as reported by Oyinda [7] an American jury awarded the sum of 1.4 million Naira in damages to a former Mobil environmental



**Figure 2:** A view of two rough and the only major roads in the Oloibiri community.



**Figure 3:** A view of Oloibiri community (mother of crude oil production) in Nigeria from the River side.

manager, who had alleged that mobile pressured him to alter environmental audit reports and when he had refused, he was fired [8]. One might be forced to ask what is Nigeria doing as regard the pollution of Niger Delta eco-system?, is the government aware of gas flaring?, Oil spillage from pipes, storage tanks, drilling mud, bunkering and other unsustainable approaches to the exploration and exploitation of energy resources.

The statement by the director of Federal Environmental Protection Agency, Millar [9] is a pointer to the facts that the government is fully aware. The statement reads “The result of the oil industry’s operation has been extensive degradation of the country’s land and marine ecosystem” Most of which has come from improper disposal of drilling mud, shipping and terrestrial traffic accidents, tank washing and oil ballast discharges, depot leakage and failure or rupture in oil pipelines [7]. The National Assembly sitting in Abuja that same year 2003 came to agreement that in the near future, the legislative would pass law which requires multi-national oil companies to abide by world environmental standards. The deadline imposed on the oil companies to phase out gas flaring completely was once again extended from 2004 to 2008 [10]. But

surprisingly, gas flaring is still going on in oil facilities offshore as well as on-shore. Do we take our environmental protection seriously?, do we have existing environmental laws?, if we do, why is it that the Multi-national Oil Companies still flare gas, spill oil and pollute our land and marine environment with impunity?

### Environmental degradation-implication to national development

When talking about the concept of development, one should consider certain variables; the income per-head, the Gross Domestic Product, the standard of living of the people and their general well-being. Ugabi [11], maintained that national development is the integration of both human and natural resources with public policies to move a nation for higher state of modernization. To a larger extent, national development is the utilization of the available national resources both human and natural for the actualization of the goals of self reliance, equity and justice, provision of welfare services, low level of unemployment, industrialization, income-export etc. when this is achieved; we say that a nation is developed [12].

On the contrary, the discovery of oil and subsequent exploitation has brought untold hardship, injustice, poor health, economic sabotage, crisis, social injustice and above all the deplorable state of the Niger Delta environment. The people of Nigeria has lost most of her oil resources to bunkering, spillages, sabotage-hence the objective of her developmental strategies cannot be achieved. There is a problem of poor data base, high level of corruption, poor implementation of development plans, external manipulation etc. illiteracy and militancy causing underdevelopment rather than development [13].

### Conclusion/Recommendations

It is imperative that Nigeria should learn to implement her existing environmental laws; the cabotage (shipping) laws, adequate environmental audit, monitoring and supervision to detect and solve existing environmental challenges in good time. A thorough environmental impact assessment must be done before carrying out any developmental project. The educational curriculum experts should introduce health safety and environment as a subject in secondary schools, environmental safety should be introduced into public sectors as well. It is indeed a misdemeanor for the national assembly to meet sometimes in 2003 with the aim of passing laws that would require the multi-national oil companies to abide by world environmental standard, only to extend the deadline for gas flaring from 2004 to 2008 but in 2013 gas flaring is still on increase? Is a major question of concern?. It is therefore very important to call on policy makers to make their institutional framework transparent, workable and timely, for a stitch in time saves nine.

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