

## ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION AND THE NIGER DELTA CRISES

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### ABSTRACT

The problem of environmental degradation is global and topical as a result of the heightened industrial activities taking place in all countries of the world, occasioning the dangerous global warming and depletion of the ozone layer, threatening mankind. The Niger Delta region of Nigeria has been the hub of oil exploration and exploitation activities in Nigeria carried out by various multi-national oil companies; and have equally been theatre of conflicts and crises, which has drawn the attention of the entire world. Violent conflicts and militant activities undertaken by the youths of the region have caused the deaths of oil workers of many nations and have continually affected global oil market prices. The paper reveals that environment pollution and degradation occasioned by the operational activities of the oil multi-national underlie the conflict situation and crises in the Niger Delta region. This paper therefore examines and confirms the level, nature and impacts of environmental degradation of the region and concludes that effects of the operation of the oil companies on the environment are not only devastating but have triggered off the crises in the region. The study depended on reports and existing studies on the region, as well as, personal observations of the author who hails from one of the oil producing communities of the Niger Delta.

**KEYWORDS:** Environmental pollution, degradation, oil exploitation and conflicts.

### INTRODUCTION

Environmental degradation is a subject of global concern as heightened industrial activities have impacted negatively on environments of nations. Industrial wastes emanating from activities of manufacturing and mineral resources exploiting companies have occasioned degradation of the environment where they operate with far reaching implications for human livelihood and existence.

In the Niger Delta of Nigeria, it has been alleged that the activities of oil exploration and exploitation companies have been responsible for the incidence of environmental pollution and degradation of the region. Furthermore the abiding crises in the Niger Delta has been linked to the negative impact of the activities of the multi-national oil companies which have degraded the region environment, occasioning poverty, deprivations and attendant reactions of the people. The fact that the environment of Niger Delta is still polluted and continually degraded without remediation makes this paper needful. Moreso, other core complaints of the people occasioned the crises are still persisting.

This effort shall examine the nature and extent of environmental degradation exacted by the exploration and exploitation activities of the oil multinational on the environment and people of the Niger Delta; and the conflict situation in the region.

## **ENVIRONMENTAL POLLUTION AND DEGRADATION IN THE NIGER DELTA**

A report compiled by the World Wild Fund, the world conservation union, with representatives from Nigeria and the Nigerian Conservation Foundation, conclude that the Niger Delta is one of the five most polluted spots in the world (cited in Azaiki 2003). The major negative effect of pollution is environmental degradation. In 1983, the inspectorate division of the NNPC accepted that environmental problems in the Niger Delta were caused by the activities of the oil companies operating in the region resulting from pollution.

Pollution refers to the presence of matter or energy whose nature, location or quantity have undesired effects on environment, which may arise from nature (natural pollutants) or as a result of human activities (anthropogenic pollutants), through the environmental media of air, land or water. (Callan and Thomas, 1996)

In the Niger Delta, it has been found that major pollutions that have brought environmental degradation have been mostly oil spillage and gas flaring by the oil companies, leading to soil fertility loss, delta forest loss, biodiversity depletion and fisheries decline among many others.

Gas flaring, which is identified as one of the foremost environmental pollutants in the Niger Delta, occasioning environmental degradation of the region, is of grave concern, and engenders malignant negative impact on the people and the ecosystem.

Gas flaring has left its horrible scare on several communities in the Niger Delta. When petroleum is extracted usually a natural gas known as “associated gas” emerges along with it. In the developed world, oil Companies either capture the associated gas for use or re-inject them into ground. This practice prevents the economic waste of the gas while also avoiding the negative impact of flaring the gas on the environment. But in Nigeria, Oil Companies burn much of the gas at the point of extraction.

A report by the Department of petroleum resources, a subsidiary of Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) documents 117 gas flare sites in the region. The most gigantic and dreadful are the five giant gas burners at the Nigerian Agip Oil Company (NAOC) Ebocha Oil centre, the largest oil centre of NAOC located in Egbema clan where gas has been flared since 1971.

Another report by microbiology department, Abia State University says that Nigeria has over 200 gas flaring sites, some of which have been on continuously for 30years (Tell magazine 2010). According to the Canadian Public health Association, flared gas contain more than 250 toxins, including mercury, benzene and arsenic, which are inimical to human life. Gas flares reported by

Environmental Rights Action (ERA) (2009) is responsible for a variety of health problems including cancers, blood disorders, skin diseases and respiratory diseases.

(Azaiki 2003) asserts that every known law on environmental safety that would discourage or check gas flaring in Nigeria has been violated. He reports that the average rate of gas flaring in the world is about 4% ,and that in Nigeria over 70% of associated gas is flared, making Nigeria the country to have the notorious record of 25% of all gas flared in the World . The World Bank has noted that Nigerian oil fields contribute more to global warming than the rest of the world put together (World Bank report, 1995).

Gas flaring causes acid rain and gaseous emissions that destroy, corrode and disfigure roofs. It therefore causes health hazards inimical to the life of the Niger Delta inhabitants, human, animal and marine life, as well as bio-diversity depletion.

Gas flaring has been on in the oil producing areas since 1958 when oil production started in Nigeria, all the associated gas as noted earlier has continued to be flared. In 1969 and 1979, the federal Government enacted decrees to curb the menace of gas flaring but lacked the strong will to enforce the laws. Fines on gas flaring were rather imposed on oil companies. It stands at the rate of N20 for every 1000 SEE of gas flared (Oloruntimahin and Ayoade 2002). The oil companies, rather than stop gas flaring or re-inject gas to the oil wells, prefer to pay penalty, which they considered cheaper.

The government's wishy-washy laws and lack of proper enforcement have not therefore significantly changed the attitude of the oil companies, making the volume of Nigerian gas flaring rank among the highest in the world. Worse-still, the oil producing communities who directly suffer the negative impact of the gas flares are denied financial benefit of the fines which are paid to the federal government.

The World Bank (1995) observed that flaring of gas as percentage of gross oil production stood at 76% in 1991. From 1991 to 1998, gas flaring decreased only by one percent. Gas flaring is therefore a major source of environment pollution in the oil producing areas and the oil producing companies are reluctant to comply with regulatory standards in Nigeria. Thus Niger Delta environment is badly polluted as a result of long years of continuous gas flaring.

Oil spillages and blowouts constitute other major pollutants of the Niger Delta environment.

Oil spills occur as a result of such factors, occasions or developments as equipment failure, accidents, natural hazards and deliberate human actions. As a result of these externalities, huge volumes of oil have been spilled into the environment - land and water (rivers, ponds, lakes and sea), causing serious damages to the ecosystem. The most publicized cause of oil spills in Nigeria is vandalization. This is the deliberate tampering by inhabitants of oil bearing communities and intruders, causing oil spills due to anger, frustration, disillusionment or inadequate compensation to

oil bearing communities. Other instances are the desire to take part of the spilled oil (petroleum products) for pecuniary gains.

The most common cause of oil spill, however, is equipment failure of the oil companies in their operations, which is linked to overloading, manufacturing defects, age of oil pipelines, among others. At times, pipeline and holding tanks leak oil into the soil, which may not be easily detected.

Also, at various stages of oil production, accidents do occur resulting in intermittent discharge of oil into the environment. Oil well blow- outs, which are associated with uncontrollable drilling into over- pressured zones far down in the bore-hole, may lead to escape of crude oil onto the land and rivers.

The infamous Texaco 1990 oil blow out which polluted many creeks and rivers of various communities in the Niger Delta was an environmental disaster that adversely affected the economic activities of many families.

According to a report by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) (2006), titled Niger delta Human Development report, the region recorded over 6,800 oil spills between 1976 and 2006, with a loss of approximately 3 million barrels of oil. A more recent report by

Amnesty International (2009), titled Nigeria: Petroleum, Pollution Poverty in the Niger Delta says that for the past 50years, the region has experienced oil spills on par with the Exxon Valdez every year. The report states that between 9 million and 13 million barrels had leaked in the five decades of oil operations.

The Exxon Valdez oil spills which happened in Alaska United States in 1989 spilled 750,000 barrels crude oil into the Sea. It was described as one of the worst human caused of environmental disaster ever to occur in history. (Algon M 2010). Given this assertion, it means that the quantum of the Niger Delta oil spills amount to something worse than disaster.

The pollution associated with the activities of the oil producing companies in the Niger Delta has caused serious damages and environmental hazards to both the environment and people of the Niger Delta region, leading to a highly degraded environment that can no more sustain the traditional economic activities of the region's people. Specifically, the environmental damages and complications facing the Niger Delta include soil quality depletion, air and water pollutions, loss of biological diversity, climatic change, destruction of ozone layer, management of toxic waste and other associated environmental problems.

**Table of oil spill data in the niger delta 1991-1996**

<b>YEAR</b>	<b>No. of Spills</b>	<b>Quantity of spills (Barrels)</b>	<b>Quantity Recovered (Barrels)</b>	<b>Net loss to environment (Barrels)</b>	<b>% Loss to environment</b>
1991	258	108,367.01	2,785.96	105,581.05	97.41
1992	378	51,187.90	1,476.70	49,711.20	97.12
1993	453	8,105.32	2,937.08	5,168.24	63.76
1994	495	35,123.71	2,335.93	32,796.78	93.37
1995	417	63,677.17	3,110.02	60,567.15	95.12
1996	156	39,903.66	1,183.80	38,719.86	97.03
Total	2,159	306,364.77	13,829.49	292,544.28	95.49

**SOURCE: The Department of Petroleum Resources**

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Apart from the effects of oil spills and gas flaring in the Niger Delta environment, the oil exploitation activities impacted negatively in various forms to degrade the environment.

The wastes produced from Petroleum exploration and production activities consists of varying chemicals generated at each phase of their operations. The disposal of these wastes in the Niger Delta has polluted land and water, damaged fisheries and aquaculture, undermining the human right to an adequate standard of living. Oil exploration activities equally produce hazardous wastes which include drilling mud produce water and radioactive materials which poison the environment and kill aquatic and terrestrial life forms.

Other oil exploration activities affecting the environment include, dredging of creeks and rivers, disposal drilling waste and seismic activities.

Adekoya (1995) pointed out that oil activity has spelt doom to intricate biological webs of life that sustains the myriad of species. During seismic surveys and exploration for crude oil, there is extensive use of explosives to obtain configuration of the sub surface sediments. This activity has been reputed to result in vast destruction of the environment. The use of explosives during seismic surveys in oil exploration is of serious environmental hazard. Fish and some other forms of aquatic

life in both marine and fresh water, including many riverine and coastal villages suffer obvious stress during seismic surveys. The loud and excessive noise is known to adversely affect the behavior of wildlife and impair the hearing of the local population. Chikwendu (1998) has reported diverse geological hazards and the extensive destruction of vegetation during provision of access by seismic crew, threatening massive extinction of large number of flora and fauna.

On the whole, the visible signs of environmental degradation in the Niger Delta due to oil pollution can be summed up as decrease in fishery resources, damage to marine flora and fauna, loss of biodiversity, deforestation, coastal and marine erosion and flooding. The associated industries to oil like refineries, petrochemicals and fertilizer plants, occasion environment hazards emanating from industrial effluents and air emissions, industrial solid waste disposal, toxic waste among others.

## **THE NIGER DELTA CRISIS**

The oil explorations and exploitation activities in the Delta region which generate incessant pollutions of the land and waters of the Niger Delta environments from oil spillages on farmlands and fishing waters has rendered the traditional farming and fishing activities of the people unprofitable as a result of the degradation of the lands and waters, the mainstay of the people's livelihood.

Indeed from our study, for more than five decades the Niger Delta has suffered from the twin evil of oil spill and gas flaring. The oil spills and gas flares experienced by the communities of the region over the years had no doubt its attendant negative effects on their environment, health and livelihood. An UNDP annual report (2009) titled "Nigeria: Petroleum, pollution, and poverty in the Niger Delta" observes that the enormously rich natural endowment in the Niger Delta in the form of land, water, forests and fauna have been subjected to extreme degradation due to oil prospecting. Poverty therefore ravages the region's people while the

Nigerian state and oil mult-nationals do little or nothing to alleviate the suffering of the people, remediate the degraded environment For instance Oloibiri where oil was first struck in Nigeria has only one government institution a small health centre, no good road, no electricity, no portable water, etc.

The UNDP report further captured the situation in the Niger Delta as a region suffering from administrative neglect, crumbling social infrastructure and services, high unemployment, social deprivation, abject poverty, filth and squalor, and endemic conflict.

The report further notes that the region has become one of the worlds' starkest and most disturbing examples of the "resource curse".

Francis Amanda, a Computer Engineer and an indigene of Bayelsa State (cited in Tell Magazine) observed that Oil has become a curse to the region. According to him, oil has brought poverty, as the regions have been destroyed and people have lost their livelihood.

The UNDP report (2009) reveals that over 70 percent of the People of Niger Delta live in poverty while the Nigerian State earns so much money from the oil resources of the region. According to the report, Since Nigeria first struck oil in commercial quantity in the region, it is estimated that the nation has earned over \$600 billion from oil export, yet poverty holds sway in the region.

Decrease in soil quality and destruction of marine life have rendered the traditional occupation of the Niger Delta people unprofitable, while at the same time, the oil companies and the government who are in partnership have failed to provide alternative profitable means of livelihood or business options to allow for the peoples' sustainable development. Thus a lot of youths of the region are alienated from both their traditional means of livelihood (land and water) and the Nigerian State that cannot provide alternative jobs for them. The result is the proliferation of militia groups who have risen out of frustration and the bid to survive; taking up arms against the enemies of their lives, the oil companies and the Nigerian State.

The militia groups since the late 1990s intensified terror and aggression against the oil multinational companies and the Nigerian security agents, through destruction of oil pipelines, rigs, ocean oil drilling platforms, piracy, oil bunking and massacre on sight of police, army, navy and all agents of government found in the creeks and land areas of the Niger Delta. A press statement signed by Cynthia White, leader of Martyrs Brigade, one of the militia groups captured the resolve and objective of the militia groups;

“We have made it clear that those despotic forces of the occupation of Nigeria and its imperial collaborators should vacate the Niger Delta Area and they would not listen. Let us make it clear to them once. We shall bleed you to your marrows and you shall beg to leave our fatherland. We shall continue to unleash acts of sabotage against Agents and infrastructures of the Nigerian State and its collaborators until they vacate out lands (New swatch, 2006)”

The situation of inflammable blend of poverty, corruption, pollution, environmental degradation and the federal capture of oil revenues of the region set off violent rebellion by various youth militia groups to fight the age-long perceived injustice. The militia groups claimed that their environment has been exploited, polluted and neglected, visiting poverty on the people and therefore wanted control or greater share of Nigeria's oil revenue back to the impoverished region where the oil money is derived.

The violent rebellion was championed by the movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND). The militant groups adopted guerrilla warfare tactics and embarked on destruction of oil



installation and equipment, abduction of oil and top government workers and killing of security agents. The region was thus described as an enclave of 'intense strife'. The crisis badly disrupted oil production and almost crumbled the Nigerian economy before the amnesty programme of Late President Umaru Yar'Adua.

The amnesty program has brought relative peace and an uneasy calm in the region with some pockets of incidences and clashes between Nigerian Security Agents, especially the Joint Task Force (JTF) and some militant groups who claim that the oil companies and the Nigerian states have not changed their attitude towards the Niger Delta environment and people.

## CONCLUSION

This presentation has established clear evidence of environmental abuse and degradation in the Niger Delta due to oil exploration and exploitation activities, coupled with the neglect by the Nigerian State and oil companies which disrupt the inhabitant's means of livelihood, occasioning poverty, low quality of life and general underdevelopment of the region.

The effects of the oil companies' operations on the environment, exacerbated by the neglect and insensitivity of Nigerian government towards the condition of the region's people have triggered off the series of crises prevalent in the region. This truth is captured by Oloruntimehin and Ayoade (2002), who observed that most of the conflicts in the Niger Delta has arisen from complex environmental problem and a long history of neglect of the basic social development of the peoples who have seemed helpless, watching their land, water resources continually devastated by intensive exploitation of petroleum and gas, without deriving any appreciable benefits by way of investment in their development.

Youths and militia groups took up arms against the oil companies and government in order to protect their environment from further destruction as well as secure a fair share of the oil revenue for development of the region.

The Niger Delta crisis therefore has direct link with the pollution and degradation of the region's environment. Given this fact, lasting peace in the Niger Delta shall require tackling the environmental pollution and degradation problems of the region by both the oil companies and Nigerian state as well as improving the quality of life of the people through massive infrastructural development, and providing alternative means of livelihood for the people to engender sustainable development of the region.

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