

Social Dimensions and Consequences of Environmental Degradation in The Niger Delta of Nigeria

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INTRODUCTION

The importance of the contribution of the environment to sustainable development has become widely recognized within approximately the last two decades. This interest has arisen in response to growing awareness of, and fears about, environmental degradation effected by oil exploitation, the increasing pressures on resource demands resulting from population growth, and by increasing inequalities in access to resources. Despite this growing awareness, it is only now that concerted attempts are being made to address the problems resulting from environmentally deleterious and unequal development. These efforts require a multi-disciplinary approach to science to understand the ways in which the physical and human environments interact.

Over the past four decades, as oil industries spread their operations in the Niger Delta, the physical environment has come increasingly under threat. Many social commentators, observers and the indigenes of the oil communities regard the destruction of the environment as the greatest danger facing the people of the Niger Delta presently. The situation is critical, tragic and devastating.

Both Anthropology and Sociology at different times in the past have been conceived as disciplines that will help to reorganize human societies and at the same time make it a better place for the individuals and groups within it. The long-run aim of both disciplines is to discover the basic structure of human society, to identify the main forces that hold groups together or weaken them, and to learn what conditions transform social life. In this, Anthropology and Sociology like the other social sciences, are disciplined intellectual quests for fundamental knowledge of the nature of things. It is our belief that both Anthropology and Sociology in a critical volatile and precarious situation such as it is in the case of the people of the Niger Delta have crucial roles to play by studying the situation critically and analysing the

issues at stake. This is with a view to highlighting the social dimensions of environmental degradation and then proceed to sensitize the government about the inevitable need to alleviate the associated problems.

SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The logical question to be asked now is, why, should the environment be a matter of concern for Anthropologists and Sociologists? Aren't we talking about issues that are in the province of scientists-biologists, zoologists etc) The answers to these questions are quite immediate. Even though the environment is physical, this notwithstanding, man's interaction with the environment has its social dimensions, implications and consequences which deserves the attention of Anthropologists and Sociologists.

According to Ian (1980) since the 20th century, social scientists have been systematically applying ecological principles to the study of human societies and populations. Anthropologists have found the ecological approach a useful means of analysing human cultural arrangements. The subsistence strategy that a society uses to exploit its environment-hunting and gathering, pastoralism, horticulture, agriculture, or industrialism- has important effects on social structure and culture. Sociologists have also been deeply interested in human ecology, the interrelationship between human groups and their natural environment. It is obvious that people want an end to the ecological degradation in the Niger Delta region as they have been going through hell for so long. This inevitably makes the study of environmental degradation categorically important.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

For the people of the Niger Delta, ecological disaster is discernible and crying for solution. From Warri to Calabar, the people cannot farm or

fish because of oil spillage and pollution, they cannot drink good water and their health is in jeopardy. The ecological problem in the Niger Delta, is that Nigeria has exploited the ecosystems for resources beyond the level of sustainability. (Uyi-Ojo, 1996; Ashton-Jones et al., 1998). The environment has been exploited and damaged and unable to continue to produce the resources that people of the oil communities need. The ecological problem then, is a reality, which has to be faced. But, it is a problem, which, in the end, has no simple solution because there are just so many people wanting to survive; each of who has an equal right to do so.

It is a known fact that 90% of Nigeria's foreign exchange earnings, which form the mainstay of the Nigerian economy, are derived from petroleum products. Again oil revenues provide about 25% of GDP and 70% of budgetary expenditure. (Ashton-Jones et al., 1998) it is therefore an irony of fate that the area, which produces the bulk of the oil on which Nigeria, depends for survival and development is about the least developed of all the geopolitical zones of the country. Infrastructural facilities in most parts of the Niger Delta area are in the main at the most primordial levels. Ecological disasters resulting from oil exploration have laid the land waste, making it impossible to have potable drinking water and passable road network. Fishing, the lifeline of most inhabitants of the area is almost made impracticable and unprofitable as a result of incessant oil spillages, leading to pollution and other hazards of oil exploration. Again, fishing nets running into several thousands of naira gets destroyed as a result of oil spillages. The again had a negative impact on the quality of life of the average person in the Niger Delta. The people feel dispossessed of their God-given wealth, alienated from the polity and disillusioned about the concept of Nigeria.

Ashton-James et al. (1998) argued that there is no doubt that the oil industry has a significant adverse environmental impact upon the Niger Delta. This not only damages human ecosystems, leading to deprivation and environmental health problems, but it also distorts social conditions. This distortion of social conditions in turn influences political conditions in terms of people's views about their ability to change the society in which they live and the degree to which these views

translate into tension between different groups within society.

The World Banks' observations in a 1990 report titled: National Environmental Action Plan: Towards the Development of an Environmental Action Plan for Nigeria about the oil Industry "is very revealing. According to this report,

... oil wells are located throughout the rural areas. Chronic leaks result in widespread destruction of fishing and agriculture resources. Oil exploration has contributed significantly to the deforestation of the state. Between 1979 and 1989 there were 784 reported significant incidents of oil pollution and in some cases, marine life was completely destroyed in the affected areas of Delta, Edo, Akwa Ibom, Cross Rivers, Rivers and Ondo states. Pollution also is attributed to spillage, washing of tankers, dredging, moving of heavy equipments and deballasting (World Bank 1990: 15).

Finally there is the problem associated with compensation. According to Aturu (1998) the attitude of the judiciary to the question of compensation for the victims of environmental degradation has been frustrating. Very few are the cases in which the courts have awarded damages to victims of oil spills and other disastrous after-effects of the activities of the oil companies. And the damages are so paltry and insulting that they do not cover the litigation expenses. The conservative attitude of the judges weaned on the common law on environmental issues and litigation has recently attracted scholarly condemnation.

From the foregoing discussions, it is a categorically clear that the government cannot feel unconcerned and insensitive about the pain, agony, deprivation, neglect and the suffering which the peoples of the Niger Delta are going through as a result of the degradation of the environment. This is the rationale and the main motivation for this study.

METHODOLOGY

Design

The study was conducted between 1998 and 1999 at various locations in the Niger Delta. The locations includes:

- (1) The Ilaje community in Ondo State;
- (2) The Ojogbene, Obotobo, Sokebolo, Ekeremor Zion, Orkoakpor and Erhoike communities in Delta State;
- (3) The Okoroba, Nembe and Obrigbene communities in Bayelsa State, and;
- (4) The Ogoni communities of Botem-Tai, Bori, Kpite, Gokara and Ighogho in Rivers State.

The respondents were indigenes of the local communities listed above.

Three main instrument of data collection were adopted in this study. These are (1) the literature (2) In-depth interview and (3) Observation. In-depth interviews were conducted on randomly selected sample of five hundred respondents at the various locations. The three methods of data collection were simultaneously adopted in order to enrich the quality of the data obtained for the study.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The first social problem identified is that of unemployment resulting largely from environmental degradation. Incessant oil spillage and pollution disrupted some of the traditional occupations of people of the Niger Delta the main being farming and fishing. As a matter of fact, pollution of farmlands, fishing streams, and deforestation, corrosive erosion has all been traced to the oil exploitation and the production activities of the oil companies in the Niger Delta. A direct fall out from this is that most people whose main occupations are farming and fishing have thus been deprived of their source of livelihood. As a matter of fact, some fishermen showed fish nets, which have been destroyed in the incessant oil spills. A lot of farm crops and lands were also

destroyed in several instances while 95.8% of the respondents claimed that oil exploitation had denied them of their main source of livelihood. This thus confirms an earlier study by Ashton-Jones et al. (1998) that oil exploitation has denied most people in the Niger Delta of their means of livelihood.

An associated problem resulting from environmental degradation and unemployment is that of poverty. Again there is poverty because adequate compensation is not paid, nor are any alternative income generating measures put in place to cushion the loss of farmlands, crops and fishing sites. The high level of unemployment in the Niger Delta has impoverished the people. Apart from impoverishing the people, it has also led continuous deterioration in the quality of life. Although there are several millions of poor people in the other parts of the country, this notwithstanding, poverty tends to be at its worst in the Niger Delta region. The data released by the Federal office of statistics on the incidence of poverty in Nigeria for 1996/97 is 48.5% while the data obtained from this study shows that 87% of the respondents claimed that they are living in poverty. Olayemi (1995) described poverty as a situation where people have no access to the basic necessities of life such as food, clothing and decent shelter; are unable to meet social, economic and political obligations. In a similar manner, Obadan (1996) sees poverty as a situation where people are unable to obtain an adequate income, find a stable job, own property or maintain healthy living conditions. Malnutrition, lack of education, substandard housing-that is acute shortage of social infra-structures and the likes are generally most severe in the Niger Delta.

Secondly, environmental degradation is also

Table 1: Respondents' assessment of the social impact of environmental degradation

<i>S.No.</i>	<i>Social</i>	<i>Frequency distribution</i>	<i>Percentages</i>
1.	Unemployment and deprivation of means of livelihood	479	95.8
2.	Poverty	435	87
3.	Health Hazards, Sickness and Diseases	378	75.6
4.	Violence	301	60.2
5.	Deaths	289	57.8
6.	Social and Physical Dislocation	203	40.6
7.	Reduction in Usable land	317	63.4
8.	Repressive laws and Decrees	428	85.6
9.	Breakdown in Cultural Values, Norms and Traditions	302	60.4
10.	Miscellaneous Factors/ Others	330	66

accompanied by pollution, which endangered life and species and created a variety of health hazards. Oil pollution is an epidemic throughout the Niger Delta. Health wise, women and children are more susceptible to diseases than men as 57.9% of the respondents who claimed that environmental degradation has affected their health negatively are women. When the air, seas and farmlands are polluted, there is bound to be an outbreak of diseases. In the Niger Delta, there has been increased incidence of certain diseases like bronchial asthma, upper respiratory tract diseases, gastroenteritis, cancer, and children are hard of hearing due to the noise from the flaring of gas. Noise arises from the generations of the drilling camp and the drilling operation. Ashton-Jones et al. (1998) stated that high noise levels could be annoying, disturbing and injurious to people living close to oil installations. The impact of gas flaring most especially horizontal gas flaring on air pollution is critical. Again, in human terms much of the water in the Niger Delta is so polluted that illness and death from water-borne diseases are part of life. The most common water-borne illnesses are diarrhea, dysentery and cholera, and there is the ever-present danger of typhoid and guinea worm infection as 61% of the respondents acknowledged the severe occurrence of water-borne diseases in the Niger Delta. Moreover, parts of the Niger Delta are suitable environments for bilharzias and river blindness. Giddens (1996) argued that some forms of pollution produce health hazards. And as such the protection of the environment thus forms part of programmes of preventative medicine. However the contrary is the case in the Niger Delta where both the oil companies and government are not doing anything concrete to stop oil pollution and gas flaring. There are no appropriate local controls over pollution and flaring.

Thirdly, the youths radicalized by years of unfulfilled government promises and their inability to find gainful employment have resorted to violence and armed struggles. In the last decade, there have been several violent demonstrations by youths in the Niger Delta, as this seems to be the only language that the government understands. As a matter of fact, there have been several face-to-face battles between the youths and the members of the armed forces in

the Niger Delta. The recent violence in *Bayelsa* State after the expiration given the government to implement the terms of the December 1998 'Kaiama declaration' is a glowing example. If the government does not open up avenues for dialogue, the youths think violence is the only way to open a communication channel: This development is not in any way desirable as the youths are now getting tutored and socialized in the culture of violence. A nation that is training its youths in the culture of violence has the future to contend with. Such a nation has a great calamity waiting for it in the future. Youths should learn peace and not war or violence.

Fourthly, the environmental degradation of the Niger Delta has also meant both social and physical dislocation for the people, as some oil communities have had to relocate in the past when the environment became endangered for human habitation. Invariably social dislocation leads to loss of tradition, norms, customs, values, and deprivation of group identity and social cohesion, as people will be dispersed into different locations. Physical dislocation also means that people are separated from their natural and physical environment, that is, the environment, which they know and in which they grew up. Forty percent of the respondents claimed that environmental degradation has caused them both social and physical dislocation.

Environmental degradation has also been accompanied by lots of deaths. A large number of youths and even the aged have died as a result of the incessant violent protests, demonstrations and open confrontation with the security forces. Again, government security forces on several occasions raided the oil communities spreading terror, violence and deaths. Several deaths have been recorded in the past in the Ogoni crises, the Warri disturbances and the recent Bayelsa imbroglio in December 1998. People are also dying as a result of the prevalent poverty and malnutrition, which are direct consequences of environmental degradation. Over fifty seven percent of the respondents argued that environmental degradation and the crises that usually accompany it led to a member of avoidable deaths in the Niger Delta.

There is the land dimension of environmental degradation. Useable agricultural land in the

Niger-Delta was reduced drastically since oil exploitation started as 63.4% of the respondents admitted that environmental degradation has led to a significant reduction in usable agricultural land in the Niger Delta. Aluyor (1998) stated that farmlands in the Niger Delta have been made infertile and unproductive due to frequent oil spills that are never cleaned up properly. Some lands are lost that can never be practically brought back to forest and agricultural use. Again the traditional modes of agriculture are integrated within the local environment in such a way as to encourage the regular renewal of its crop-bearing capacities but this has been disrupted by the degradation of the environment thus spelling doom for the people.

In addition to above, several laws have also been put in place preventing the people from having total control over their environment and the resources appropriated from it. From the Petroleum Decree 51 of 1969 to the Land Use Decree of 1978 down to the Inland Waterways Authority Decree 52 of 1993, the attempt has been to vest control of the resources of the indigenous peoples of the Niger Delta in the hands of an unsympathetic central government that looks the other way while oil companies continue to destroy their environment. The people alleged that governmental agencies such as Federal Environmental Protection Agency (FEPA) and the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC)* looked the other way while these oil companies breach regulations for the protection of the environment, which they are charged to ensure compliance with. In this study, 85.6% of the respondents felt that the existing repressive

laws has prevented them from obtaining adequate compensation from both the oil companies and the government. These agencies are usually hiding under the canopy of the repressive laws to deny the people of the Niger Delta the right of living in a satisfactory environment favorable to their well-being and development.

After critically examining the situation and identifying the social dimensions of the problem, we observed that presently no concrete efforts are being made by the government to redress the problems of environmental degradation in the Niger Delta. Rather, the government has been using the instruments of coercion like the security agencies, divide and rule tactics and other state apparatuses to suppress the people. This governmental reaction is clearly and totally against the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the African Charter of Human and People Rights.

From this background and in order to ensure peaceful coexistence in the Nigerian polity as we are at the threshold of the next millennium, the following categorical imperatives were suggested.

- The people of the Niger Delta must be the first beneficiaries of whatever resources are harnessed from their environment. The people deserve some form of compensation for the loss that accompanied the degradation of their environment.
- The government must put an end to all environmental and human rights abuses in the Niger Delta.
- The government must create an avenue for

Table 2: What respondents think should be done to alleviate the social problems

<i>S. No.</i>	<i>Suggested Solutions</i>	<i>Frequency distribution</i>	<i>Percentages</i>
1.	Provision of Social Infrastructures	430	86
2.	Provision of alternative employment	483	96.6
3.	Payment of Reparation/ Compensation	401	80.2
4.	Constant Dialogue Between the People and the Government/ Oil Companies	297	59.4
5.	Addressing the Problem of Pollution	363	72.6
6.	Addressing the Problem of Poverty	438	87.6
7.	Revoking some of the Existing Laws and Decrees	363	72.6
8.	Governmental Agencies such as OMPADEC and FEPA to be Made More Functional	320	64
9.	Activities of Oil Companies to be Strictly Monitored	333	66.6
10.	Miscellaneous Factors/ Others	389	77.8

- dialogue with the people of the Niger Delta in order to know their dreams, wishes and aspirations and what they believe should be their status in the Nigerian nation.
- The establishment of Oil Mineral Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC) is a step in the right direction. This agency should however be made more functional, headed and predominantly staffed by people from the Niger Delta areas who will know and understand the plight, travails and the problem of the people. Again, this will take good care of government insensitivity to the plight of the people.
 - Prospective oil companies should as a matter of compulsion be made to reserve a certain quota or percentage of their staff allocation for indigenes of the communities where they are located. The logic of this line of reasoning is that when people are denied or deprived of the traditional occupations practicable in their environment, then they should be given alternative employment by the oil communities that degraded their environment. It is when youths cannot find gainful employment that they resort to violence.
 - The issues raised in the Ogoni Bill of Rights (1990) and the *Kaiama* Declaration (1998) must be thoroughly addressed through dialogue and not through coercion or intimidation. After all both the Ogoni Bill of Rights and the *Kaiama* Declaration are not wars nor threats of violence but the need to peacefully secure the control of the natural resources and the right to self determination.
 - All the armed wings and activists in the Niger Delta must be dissolved. This includes the Niger Delta Volunteer Force (NDVF) the *Ijaw* Youth Congress (IYC) and the '*Egbesu Boys*', the Pan -Niger Resistant Movement (*CHIKOKO*) and others. Our stand is that at the threshold of the next millennium, it is better to settle and resolve conflicts through dialogue, peaceful avenues and round table conferences rather than through violence and armed struggles. At all times, all peaceful avenues must be explored first before thinking of any other measures.
 - The Niger Delta must be well developed and be made to feel governmental presence most especially in terms of social infrastructures. We hereby suggest the establishment of schools at all levels of learning, hospitals, network of roads, communication facilities, and finally the construction of gas turbines to generate and supply electricity to all towns and villages in the oil producing communities.
 - We also suggest the establishment of a "Truth and Retribution Commission" to address squarely and at all fronts the injustices of the past.
 - That oil companies operating in Nigeria must be held peacefully to global environmental justice standards.
 - That all unjust laws like the Land Use Decree, the Petroleum Decree and similar laws which deny the people of their rights and resource be removed from our statute books.
 - That in the spirit of reconciliation all those held in connection with the demands of the oil communities for justice be released without further delay.
 - That all military task forces, including those set up ostensibly to combat crime but which have become ready tools of terror and pacification in the oil communities be scrapped or withdrawn.

CONCLUSION

It is an established fact that oil exploitation in the Niger Delta has resulted in environmental degradation, economic impoverishment and cultural destabilization. There is no doubt that today, with the stated horrendous policies; the peoples of the Niger Delta and their communities have been reduced to scavengers in the midst of their wealth.

Again, it is both sad and unfortunate that successive governments who have ruled the country have more often than not treated the Niger Delta area as a colony fit only for what can be taken out of it. From this background, it is important that something urgent must be done to alleviate the pains, sufferings and the agony of the people of the Niger Delta.

One thing is clear, Man cannot live his life to the fullest potential in a degraded environment. On this note we therefore conclude by adopting the Article 24 of the African Charter of Human and People's Rights which states that:

“All people shall have a right to a generally satisfactory environment favourable to their development”.

The African Charter is superior to all military decrees and all other legislation by any particular member state of the Organization of African Unity. And as such, Nigeria has no other rational option but to implement contents of this charter. It is envisaged that the implementation of this charter will go a long way to alleviate the sufferings of the peoples of the Niger Delta.

KEY WORDS Environment. Problems. Oil Companies. Degradation.

ABSTRACT The problem of environmental degradation in the Niger Delta is real, severe, enormous, critical, and precarious and is presently calling for both national and global attention.

This study sought to investigate the social dimensions of environmental degradation in the Niger Delta. The aim of the study is threefold:

- First, to investigate empirically the real issues at stake and the extent of environmental degradation in the Niger Delta;
- Second, to present an accurate picture of the social dimensions of environmental degradation; and
- Third, to suggest some categorical imperatives that will help to alleviate the identified social problems emanating from the impact of environmental degradation.

The study made use of both primary and secondary sources of data. The three sources of data include

- (1) The literature
- (2) Observation and
- (3) In-depth interview. These multiple methods were adopted in order to enrich the quality of the data collected for the study.

The study concluded by saying that something concrete must be done by both the government and the oil companies to cushion the effects of environmental degradation on the lives of the peoples of the Niger

Delta as all people have a right to a generally satisfactory environment favourable to their survival and development.

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