

# Energy Resources and Environmental Conflicts in Africa: Implications on Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Environmental Policy

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**ABSTRACT** Using a survey of secondary sources on energy rich countries in Africa as case studies, the study demonstrates that environmental challenges associated with energy resources create key challenges in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Africa. The arguments extended are that: despite Africa's rich endowment with wealth in energy resources including oil and gas, which could have created sustainable development and peace, the respective countries are characterised by poverty, conflicts, corruption and human rights abuses. The use of indigenous knowledge approaches to conflict transformation over these resources has not been adequately researched to inform policy. These approaches tend to be marginalised in spite of their efficacy in other cases of conflict transformation. The paper recommends that the hybrid nature of these challenges also calls for hybrid nature policy strategies combining state institutions, civil society and indigenous knowledge system-based practices and ethics.

## INTRODUCTION

The study advances the following arguments: firstly, unlike other energy rich regions, Africa is faced by a paradox of plenty, whereby the oil producing countries have not managed to diversify their economies and use the derived financial resources from energy sources for sustainable development. Paradoxically, the energy resources have been a source of conflicts and a focus of international attention. These pitfalls tend to be replicated by the newly African energy producing countries (Hintjens 2006; Sherman 2003; Alao 2007). The contradiction between poverty and abundance of mineral and other natural resources has been the contentious issue in the political economy of Africa (Collier et al. 2007; Bakoup 2014). The debate has been exacerbated by security issues emanating from the associated energy and environmental conflicts, involving human rights groups against multinational oil companies. Examples of these conflict-laden countries include Nigeria (Niger Delta), Angola (Cabinda), Sudan and Gabon (Ross 2006).

However, the academic discourses and policy developments with regard to energy resources in Africa, tend to neglect the socio-cultural aspects of energy resources exploitation. For instance, in spite of the increasing realisation by researchers and environmentalists on the importance of community-based or indigenous

knowledge systems (IKS) in natural resource management, little effort has been taken to incorporate them into environmental policy development processes. In this regard, national policies have failed to address environmental security issues by incorporating the concerns of affected local communities (Aloa 2011).

In the context of this discussion IKS refers to the bodies of knowledge developed over time in communities and traditionally transferred orally. They encompass skills, practices, innovations and belief systems (Agrawal 2003). Local communities worldwide have developed indigenous ways to manage their immediate environment including energy sources such as water, forests, land and minerals (Metiboba 2008).

## METHODOLOGY

The study was based on examination of secondary sources in the discussion of energy resources and environmental conflicts in Africa. This includes implications on IKS, environmental ethics and policy development. Secondary data involves information collected other researchers (Black 2006). The sources include books, periodicals and government and non-governmental publications related to the research problem. There were a number advantages for using an examination of secondary sources in this study. Relevant data were available and cheaper to draw conclusions and less time consuming than in primary data collection.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Energy Resources and Conflicts in Africa: A Regional Analysis

Academic literature and policy documents are increasingly paying considerable attention to conflicts over natural resources, especially in Africa. This is understandable because of the devastations associated with conflicts which link to the weakening or collapse of state institutions. Furthermore, whilst reducing the revenue coming to the affected countries, these conflicts could affect the global flow of vital resources. This section discusses the issue of energy resources and conflict in various regions of the continent.

#### *The Eastern African Situation*

Conflicts emanating from the use of energy resources in Eastern Africa are shown by the following examples (i) the tension between Egypt and Ethiopia where the latter diverted water from the Blue Nile. The issue was well summed up by Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni when he criticised Egypt for threatening Ethiopia regarding the construction of a hydroelectric dam on one of the Nile tributaries:

*“No African wants to hurt Egypt. However, Egypt cannot continue to hurt Black Africa and the countries of the tropics of Africa” (Di Nunzio 2013).*

The then Egyptian President, Mohammed Morsi, retaliated by stating that Egypt was ready to defend the waters of the Nile even by going to war. Responding to Morsi’s threats, Ethiopia’s premier, Hailemariam Desalegn, replied that the construction of the Grand Renaissance Dam was “unstoppable” (Rees 2014; Pearce 2015); (ii) the fight between Sudan and South Sudan over the oil-rich Abyei region with Sudan threatening to stop transportation of oil from South Sudan through its pipeline; (iii) Tanzania and Malawi are involved in a diplomatic war over ownership of Lake Malawi after the discovery of oil and gas in the lake. This is after Malawi awarded the oil exploration to the United Kingdom (UK)-based Surestream Petroleum; (iv) the proxy wars with mineral-rich DR Congo Rwanda and Uganda; (v) Kenya and Uganda are involved in a conflict over the ownership of Migingo Island in Lake Victoria; (vi) Ethiopia and Ken-

ya are involved in discussion on the border line between the countries due to the discovery of oil near the border. There is also tension with Ethiopia over the construction of the Gibe III hydroelectricity dam on River Omo, which flows into Lake Turkana in Kenya; (vii) the discovery of oil in the Ilemi Triangle has brought tension between South Sudan and Kenya on the ownership of the area (Nyahn 2013); (viii) Somalia and Kenya are embroiled in the claim over the Lamu basin where oil has been discovered; (ix) the conflict between Uganda and DR Congo over ownership of Lake Albert, where large deposits of oil have been discovered (Jedzet 2008).

#### *The Central and West African Situation*

The existence of oil along the Gulf of Guinea, from Nigeria to Angola creates a contradiction in a region characterised by abject poverty. This situation is aggravated by decreasing foreign aid and emphasis by donors on trade for Africa to eradicate poverty. This necessitates Africa to make the utmost benefit of its energy resources. For example, ninety percent of the Angola’s export revenues originate from oil. Yet the derived benefits have not improved the living conditions of the majority of the population since the civil war ended in April 2002 (Luvhengo 2006; Berry 2008). UN Children’s Fund (2011) reveals that one child in every four is likely to die before their fifth birthday, little over half of Angola’s children are in school and almost 50 percent of the population has no access to safe drinking water (Reno 2006). Similarly, Markakis (2008) shows that despite abundant oil revenue and a relatively small population of about half a million people, Equatorial Guinea is characterised by malnourished population, diseases and dilapidated infrastructure. Africa’s experience is contrary to that of oil producing countries in Asia, Latin America and the Middle East where oil revenues have been used to improve the livelihoods of the people (Simmons 2009).

Among the limitations characteristic of energy producing countries are that the oil revenues are controlled by governments lacking in transparency, accountability and fairness (Musifiki 2006; Blench 2007). It is on the basis of this consideration that this paper has a view that African energy producing countries such as Nigeria, Angola, Congo-Brazzaville, Cameroon and Gabon need to improve their democratic in-

stitutions and administrative capacity if the energy resources are to be beneficial to the population. These countries also need to diversify their economies for a post-oil future (Hecht 2004).

### **The Multinational Companies (MNCs) and the African State in Energy Sources Demise**

Criticisms have been levelled against the failure of multinational oil companies in addressing environmental and health concerns of local communities in areas where their operations are located (Nyahn 2013). Human rights activists have complained about high incidences of cancer, asthma and skin conditions caused by operations of multinational corporations. Luvhengo (2006) elaborates that many MNCs have acted as economic predators in the continent, exploiting national resources and changing labour relations, manipulating national economic policies and the media and committing environmental degradation. Typically MNCs target countries with low production costs and poor working conditions. This includes abundant energy resources, where profits can be maximised and repatriated without legal constraints (Jedzet 2008). Collier (2005) provides examples of African leaders General Sani Abacha of Nigeria and Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire who were being used by MNCs to exploit their countries' resources.

However, research shows that Western governments, such as the USA, UK and Germany are beginning to acknowledge the need to address the perils of energy-led development. Moreover, as a result of human rights activism some multinational oil corporations are increasing their philanthropic programmes and engaging in dialogue with civil society on ways to increase transparency in the sector. A number of factors have been expressed with regard to MNCs oil interests in Africa: (i) national strategic interest to the United States of America (USA). African oil provides fifteen percent of American imports; which reduces their dependence on oil from Middle East (Lwegaila 2006; Musifiky 2006); (ii) The superior quality of African oil, that is, though not as pure and light as Saudi oil, West African crude oil is easily accessible to refineries on America's east coast and large oil deposits have been discovered off-shore (Thomas 2004; Aloa 2007).

In spite of the negative examples in the exploitation of African natural resources for the benefit of MNCs, there are cases of African countries such as Botswana that have used their rich diamond resources for the improvement of the lives of its population due to stable political institutions (Collier 2007). However, Bakoup (2014) adds that equitable access to natural resources and protection of minority rights are essential components thriving society.

### **Socio-cultural and Human Security Considerations of Energy Resources Exploitation**

In spite of the fact that energy resource exploitation might have been beneficial to some countries, the environmental degradation and negative socio-cultural impacts emanating from energy resource exploitation tends to be neglected (Blench 2007). In some African countries such as Nigeria (Niger Delta and the Bight of Bonny) these effects have resulted into socio-economic, religious and political tensions and conflicts in the local communities. Consequently, local communities bear the brunt of the toxicity of the ecosystem and the associated health hazards.

The relationship between culture, technology and environment is discussed by Metiboba (2008) who argues that the culture of a society and the level and form of technology in that society are related. This was demonstrated by early men and women's adaptation of their knowledge and technologies to natural environment and associated value systems. This was achieved through reasoning, experimentation and communication in a specific cultural value system. In the context of this discussion culture refers to a structure of learned and shared patterns of behaviour and of understanding the meaning and value of things, ideas, emotions and actions (Metiboba 2008). One of the causes of environmental conflicts in Africa associated with exploitation of energy resources is the tendency of multinational oil corporations to neglect the socio-cultural values of local communities living in areas of operations (Tchoffo 2001). In contemporary times, science and technology are considered to be the prime movers of development. However, the use of science and technology will only be relevant if it improves the quality of life of the people and takes cognisance of their cultural values in order to avoid

conflict. This aspect tends not to be fully understood by multinational oil companies in Africa. For instance, where land acquisition is without the full consent of the community, as it has been the case in some oil-producing areas in Southern Nigeria, incessant land disputes have erupted, and litigations ensued between individuals, groups, communities, and the oil companies (Agnalino 2001; Aloa 2011).

It is on the basis of the above discussion that the paper reflects on the linkages between science and technology, environmental security and cultural values and the usefulness of these for enhancing sustainable development in energy producing African countries. It is argued that to promote environmental security for sustainable development, indigenous knowledge should be included in all local, state and national development actions, plans and discussions (Aloa 2011). The implication of all this is that a paradigm shift is required, whereby indigenous knowledge drives our development efforts in Africa.

### CONCLUSION

The paper demonstrated that natural resources including energy, have become a source of conflict in Africa. Africa is characterised by a paradox of poverty and plenty. The marginalisation of the socio-cultural aspects of energy resource exploitation in Africa, in energy resource discourses and policy development were interrogated. However, it was demonstrated that some African countries have taken tentative measures to ensure that these resources benefit the majority of the population. Multilateral institutions such as the IMF and World Bank are taking steps to increase transparency in Africa's financial resources generated from oil. As a result of human rights activism some MNCs are increasing their philanthropic programmes and engaging in dialogue with civil society on ways to increase transparency in the sector. The primary responsibility for managing Africa's oil wealth in a transparent, fair, and accountable way lies within Africa's governments.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

On the basis of the above, it is recommended that African governments should promote transparency in the energy resource exploita-

tion in terms of monitoring of the oil sector; human rights, media reports; participation of civic organisations. The multinational oil corporations should also support the international campaigns which call for public disclosure, in the energy resource sector with regard to finance, development, human rights and respect for socio-cultural and environmental rights of local communities.

The paper acknowledges that the African Union through its various structures has taken its peace and security mandate seriously, and has garnered a number of successes in resolving conflicts on the continent. Yet as countries emerge from conflict, the good governance of natural resources will be vital to the consolidation of peace and the prevention of renewed violence, and will be a fundamental pre-condition for successful post-conflict reconstruction and development. In particular, countries involved or emerging from conflict will have to develop legislative frameworks; set up monitoring and regulatory bodies; capacitate relevant implementing bodies such as the police, the customs service, the revenue collection service, the auditor and various resource management departments; develop a strategy to harness the country's natural resource wealth for poverty eradication and sustainable development; while simultaneously rebuilding the political, social and economic structures of the country.

Furthermore, the paper reflected on the linkages between science and technology, environmental security and cultural values and the usefulness of these for enhancing sustainable development in energy producing African countries. While the importance of IK has been reiterated by researchers and traditional environmentalists for sustainable development, it is worrisome to observe that little effort has been initiated to incorporate this into formal environmental policy and decision making processes.

IK can play a crucial role in the formulation and implementation of sustainable environmental policies. Policy makers in Africa, often mistakenly formulate policies for conserving and restoring the environment by ignoring the local people's skills and traditional conservation techniques. However, the fact remains that these traditional experts possess valuable indigenous wisdom to manage their environment in effective ways. To promote environmental security for sustainable development, indigenous knowl-

edge should be included in all local, state and national development actions, plans and discussions. It is, therefore, important for government, non-state actors and environmental stakeholders to promote the effectiveness of indigenous knowledge to promote practices and policies that will enhance environmental security and by extension sustainable development. The implication of all this is that a paradigm shift is required, whereby indigenous knowledge drives our development efforts in Africa.

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