

Sustainable Development, Environmental Degradation and the Entrenchment of Poverty in the Niger Delta of Nigeria

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INTRODUCTION

The environment has become a prominent, but complex and multi-dimensional issue on the public policy agenda of states and international organizations. This transformation after a long period of benign neglect, began in Rio in 1992. The issue of the environment is today perceived not simply as a narrow ecological problem of how to ensure a symbiotic and congruent inter-face between man and his environment. It is more than that. Its inner core has political, developmental, sociological and scientific ramifications, all of which are anchored to the new concept.

The concept of sustainable development emanated from the 1987 Report titled "Our Common Future" prepared by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). This report, also known as the Brundtland Report, recognized that many development activities in many nations, especially in developing countries, were leaving growing numbers of people poor and vulnerable, while at the same time degrading their environment. The report then concluded that a new path for development would be needed to sustain human progress not just in a few places for a few years but globally in the future. This conclusion led the Report to focus on issues such as, population, energy, industry, human settlement and quality of life.

There is no general consensus on a theoretical definition of sustainable development neither is there any consensus on how a sustainable process of development can be achieved. However, it is now widely accepted that if the environment is significantly being degraded and the degradation is not accounted for, then development will be wrongly measured. Sustainable development therefore is not just about protecting the environment but it is about how we can best make productive use of our natural resources in order to eliminate poverty and improve human welfare and quality of life.

Although there is no universal agreement as

to the definition of sustainable development, certain elements common in most definitions have been identified. They include the following:-

- concern for economic and social viability of future generations – intergenerational equity;
- alleviation of poverty, concern for social welfare ;
- local participation in the planning and execution of development projects; and
- positive impact on environment and resource use.

But the one that is important to us in this study is finding the means of sustaining the environment in order to reduce poverty and enhance the quality of life.

The importance of the contribution of the social sciences and technology 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 industrialization, 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 in recent times that concerted attempts are being made to address the problems resulting from environmentally deleterious and unequal development. These efforts require a multidisciplinary approach to understand the ways in which environmental degradation has contributed to the entrenchment of poverty in the Niger Delta of Nigeria.

Nigeria has a pool of renewable and non-renewable resources but to a large extent the exploitation of these has failed to meaningfully alleviate the poverty of most of the population, most especially people in the Niger Delta (Aluko, 2000). The exploitation of the non-renewable resources requires particular attention because, by its very nature, this is unsustainable. Ways had to be found of ensuring that Nigeria achieves maximum benefit from these resources.

It is not just the fitness of Nigeria's non-

renewable resource that is of concern in their exploitation. The environmental degradation that results needs to be addressed if the quality of the living environment is to be retained or improved. The sciences – both the social and natural sciences can make an important contribution in areas such as hazardous waste management, pollution control, and environmental restoration. Again, the exploitation of Nigeria's renewable resources also requires attention: Nigeria experiences one of the largest population growth rates in Africa* which compound the conflicting needs of stabilizing resource bases, and alleviating poverty (*2.8% growth rate).

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study seeks to examine (i) how environmental degradation led to the entrenchment of poverty in the Niger Delta and (ii) the ways through which the environment can be managed in order to enhance sustainable development, alleviate poverty and enhance the quality of life of the peoples in the Niger Delta.

The focus of Social scientists in general and Anthropology and Sociology in particular on environmental issues is no longer a recent phenomenon. Social scientists are increasingly being called upon to conduct studies through which the environment can be better managed in order to facilitate sustainable development.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In a 1995 two volume study, *Defining an Environmental Development for the Niger Delta*, a research product of the industry and energy operatives division of West Central Africa Development of the World Bank, it is stated that: *“The Niger Delta has been blessed with an abundance of physical and human resources including the majority of Nigerian oil and gas deposits good agricultural land, extensive forests, excellent fisheries as well as with well-developed industrial base, a strong-banking (potential system) a large labour force and an (potential) exuberant sector”*. The report however regretted that the Niger-Delta's tremendous potential for economic growth and sustainable development remains unfulfilled and its future is threatened by deteriorating economic conditions that are not being addressed by present policies and actions.

The problem of environmental degradation in the Niger Delta and how this has hindered

sustainable development and led to the impoverishment of the peoples of the Niger Delta has been acknowledged by all and sundry. This has been acknowledged by people in both national and international circles, scholars, governmental and non-governmental agencies, oil companies and international agencies. It is however, sad to observe that in spite of the acknowledgement of the issues involved in environmental degradation, nothing much has been done to address the plight of people in the Niger Delta.

This is because the issues at stake in environmental degradation involves problems that deals with the survival of the present generation and a compromise of the future. They are issues that have to be addressed now otherwise they portend danger, and have serious negative implications for the future. All these put together inevitably makes the study of environmental degradation categorically important.

THE LITERATURE

In this section on the review of the literature, the main point of focus is to examine how environmental degradation led to the entrenchment of poverty in the Nigeria Delta. This quotation from the World Bank tells it all.

“The oil industry, particularly in Rivers and Bayelsa States has both an urban and a rural presence. Oil wells are located throughout the rural area. Chronic leaks result in widespread destruction of fishing and agricultural 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 Edo, Delta, Akwa Ibom, Cross Rivers, Rivers and Ondo States. Pollution is also attributed to spillages, washing of tankers, dredging, moving of heavy equipments and deballasting”.

(The World Bank's observations in a 1990 report titled *National Environment Action Plan: Towards the Development of an Environmental Action Plan for Nigeria*)

Two things readily appear from the above information. The first is the fact that, oil exploration brought incessant oil spills and pollution which disrupted some of the traditional occupations of the people in the Niger Delta, the main ones being farming and fishing. A direct fall out from this is that most people whose main

occupations are farming and fishing have thus been deprived of their means of livelihood. Because most of the people do not have alternative vocations which they could easily turn to, the problem of unemployment sets in. The deprivation of their traditional occupations coupled with the absence of alternative employment inevitably led to the entrenchment of poverty among the peoples of the Niger Delta.

Other reports collated by Eraction in 1998 also corroborates the above position.

Akobo had this to say :

"Most of the Niger Delta remain a shell even though Shell and the other multinational oil companies are still operating in the area. Pollution of farmlands, fishing streams, deforestation, corrosive erosion and other woes have all been traced to the oil exploration and production activities of the multinationals. The consequence is that the Niger Delta's mangrove and rainforest face real threats of being wiped out. Also facing possible extinction are the fauna and the indigenous peoples that depend on them for survival".

Corroborating the same assertion, Aluyor (1998) reported that:

"Fishing which is a means of livelihood for the women has been denied them since their waters have been polluted and fishes have died due to pollution. Even their ground water sources have been poisoned and made unusable."

Another problem which further helped to entrench poverty among the peoples of the Niger Delta is the inadequacy of compensations usually awarded to the oil communities by the courts. According to Aturu (1998) the attitude of the judiciary to the question of compensation for the victims of environmental degradation has been very frustrating and quite discouraging. He stated that very few are the cases in which the courts have awarded damages to victims of oil spills and other disastrous effects of oil exploitation. And the damages are so paltry and insulting that they do not cover the litigation expenses. It is a double-tragedy of unimaginable proportion for people to lose their farmlands, fishing nets and at the same time not be adequately compensated. The inadequacy of compensations again contribute significantly to the entrenchment of poverty in the Niger Delta.

Again, Aturu (1998) had this to say on the entrenchment of poverty in the Niger Delta.

"... black substances (crude oil) covered the

creeks, rivers and ponds. Their livestock which drank water from those sources died in their hundreds. The communities also lost their economic trees and their fishing rights as all aquatic life in those region naturally came to an end. Of course the communities alleged that the oil companies negligence caused the spillage. An attempt to settle the matter amicably failed due to the contemptible offer of N300.00 to the representatives of the communities. ..."

There is also the land dimension of environmental degradation. Useable agricultural land in the Niger Delta was reduced drastically since oil exploitation started. Aluyor (1998) argued 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 with no possibility of it being ever redeemed to forest and agricultural usage. More importantly, 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 it is sad to observe that these capacities has been disrupted by oil exploitation thus aggravating the situation.

If the philosophy that says 'Health is wealth' is accepted, then there is the need to examine the health dimensions of environmental degradation. Akobo (1998) had this to say: *"... Pollution of farmlands, fishing streams, deforestation, corrosive erosion and other woes have all been traced to the oil exploration and protection activities of the multinationals. There are also high pressure pipelines crisis-crossing homes. All of these have left the poor, local people at the mercy of respiratory, abdominal and cancerous illnesses which they never suffered from prior to shell's presence"*

In a report by Guardian correspondent, on Wednesday, August 21, 2002, the Ilaje women had this to say: *"The women specifically accused the oil company of 'ceaselessly digging artificial canals all over its host communities in Ugbo Kingdom without proper Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) thereby opening up there area to inflow of the ocean into their fresh water.*

Seawater enters into the originally fresh water through these canals thus causing serious ecological problems. The seawater influx has resulted in serious vegetation damage. Our fishermen and women no longer catch enough fish to earn a living. Our farmlands, fish ponds and waterways are polluted or contaminated by oil spills as a

result of prolonged exploitation by Chevron”

Oil pollution remain epidemic throughout the Niger Delta. When the air, seas and farmlands become polluted, there is bound to be an outbreak of diseases. Since oil exploitation started, there has been an increase in the incidence of certain diseases like bronchial asthma, upper respiratory tract diseases, gastroenteritis, cancer and children suffer from hearing problems because of the noise associated with gas flaring. (Ashton- Jones *et al* 1998). Again, in human terms much of the water in the Niger Delta is so polluted that illnesses from water borne diseases have become a part of daily living.

The UNDP Report (2000) on Overcoming Human Poverty argued that poverty is entrenched in the Niger Delta because most national poverty programmes do not usually have a strong environmental component. Even in countries where environmental degradation has a big impact on the poor, the ministry of environment is rarely represented on government coordinating committees for poverty reduction. So far, Nigeria like many other counties have kept poverty plans and environmental plans separate. But UNDP has found that “win-win” solutions exist for both the environment and the poor- policies and public actions that can break the supposed “downward spiral” of impoverishment and environmental damage.

There is also the problem with the Nigerian state as a factor in the entrenchment of poverty in the Niger Delta. The fact is that the environmental and human rights violations caused by the oil industry are intricately bound with the nature and character of the Nigerian state, particularly the state’s relationships with indigenous minority ethnic nationalities who host oil activities. The government at the centre gave exploitation rights to the oil companies without any dialogue or consultation with the local people. The oil companies went into oil exploitation without any agreement and respect for the local people and acted as if they are not in any way responsible or accountable to these people. This made the oil companies to exploit the environment in a manner detrimental to the lives and survival of the indigenous people. The consequence of this is the acute poverty been witnessed all over the Niger Delta.

From the foregoing discussions, it is evidently clear that environmental degradation led to the entrenchment of poverty among the peoples

of Nigeria. Apart from impoverishing the people, it has also led continuous deterioration in the quality of life of these people. There is no doubt that today, the peoples of the Niger Delta and their communities have been made scavengers in the midst of their wealth.

METHODOLOGY

Design: This study was conducted at various locations in the Niger Delta. The locations includes:

1. the Ilaje communities in Ondo State.
2. the Ojogbene, Obotobo, Sokebolo, Gbaramatus, Orkeakpor, Ekeremor Zion, Erhoike, Ogulagha, Ugborodo, Odimodi, Ubeji and Ajaetan communities in Delta State.

The respondents were indigenes of the oil communities listed above.

Three main instruments of data collection were adopted in this study. These are:

1. In-depth interviews and (2) observation as primary sources of data and (3) the literature as secondary sources of data.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Virtually all our respondents, 95.8% of them agreed that oil exploitation and the environmental degradation that accompanied it, is largely responsible for their impoverishment as this denied them of their primary source of livelihood. This finding corroborates the earlier ones by Ashton – Jones *et al* (1998) Eraction (1998) and Aluko (2000) that oil exploitation has denied most people in the Niger Delta of their means of livelihood.

These respondents all argued that the fact that they do not have access to alternative vocations in their local communities further helped to aggravate the incidence and severity of poverty in the Niger Delta.

With regard to health, 75.6% of our respondents agreed that environmental degradation and its-affect-effects has led to the impoverishment of the health of the people. They argued that there has been increased incidence of certain diseases which were not prevalent prior to the exploitation of oil.

In another instance, 80.2% of our respondents stated that when oil spillage occurs in their communities resulting in unimaginable losses (Farmlands, crops, fishing sites and equipments),

the oil companies do not usually compensate them adequately. And that when they seek legal redress in the courts, the damages awarded do not usually commensurate with the losses that they must have incurred. This again will inevitably aggravate the incidence and severity of poverty.

Finally, 64% of our respondents stated that poverty became entrenched in the Niger Delta because the oil companies exploited the environment in a way and manner that it cannot be made to enhance sustainable development. The situation was further compounded by the fact that oil companies did not "Environmental Impact Assessment" before commencing oil exploitation. As such no provisions were made in advance by these oil companies to cushion the effect of oil exploitation. Again, the government and its agencies such as Federal Environmental Protection agency (FEPA), Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC), Oil mineral Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC) and others are not monitoring and doing enough to enforce environmental standards and laws in order to enhance sustainable development. Also associated with this is the fact of the institutionalization of corruption which meant that government agencies and officials are easily settled whenever they breach environmental laws.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The UNDP Report (2000) on overcoming human poverty argued that the marginalization of indigenous peoples has a long history. In many countries they remain the most excluded and deprived, with their human rights abused, their land and natural resources appropriated and their languages and cultures assailed. The natural environments they rely on for sustenance are being depleted or destroyed. Unsurprising then, that they live shorter lives in unhealthier conditions. They thus merit special attention in poverty programmes. This calls for the setting up of poverty alleviation schemes designed exclusively for the people of the Niger Delta.

So far, environmental plans and poverty plans have been kept separate. The divide between national anti-poverty plans and national environmental plans needs to be broken down. A start would be to make sure that poverty – reducing environmental policies are a major component of poverty programmes, and that

environment ministries are represented on the coordinating bodies for the programmes.

There must be adequate reparations for environmental devastation. People who become impoverished as a result of environmental degradation must be adequately compensated in order to move them from the threshold of poverty.

The Niger Delta must be provided with adequate social infrastructures such as clean drinking water, electricity, schools, hospitals, good network of roads etc in order to enhance the quality of life of the people.

The oil companies operating in the Nigeria Delta must be held peacefully to global environment justice standards. They must be made to conduct their exploitation in such a way and manner that the environment does not become degraded. This is the only way through which sustainable development can be enhanced. Where possible the oil companies must provide employment opportunities and scholarships for the restive youths in the Niger Delta.

We also suggest the establishment of a Niger Delta University – a multi-campus university with faculties in strategic locations in the Niger Delta. It is suggested that this university should offer specialized courses in Petroleum, Medicine, Law, Agriculture and Environmental Management. It is envisaged that many of the restive youths in Niger Delta will find solace in this University. Again, the University will generate employment opportunities as well.

Finally, we recommend the convocation of a national conference in which the problems of the Niger Delta and others having to do with the Nigerian state can be addressed. Events in contemporary times have shown that the Nigerian state need restructuring in which local people, minority nationalities and indeed all segments of the society will have the power to influence and determine the processes that affect their lives.

CONCLUSION

Today the Niger Delta is in turmoil, restive, poor, backward and neglected. The attitude of the Nigerian State and the oil companies has been that of insensitivity, negligence and contempt. Plunder and impoverishment are very strong words but they fail to capture the depth of poverty, misery and sorrow visited on this once beautiful communities. The situation again is being compounded by the recent judgment by the

supreme court which concluded the onshore – offshore litigation in favour of the federal government. The people of the Nigeria Delta are becoming restive day by day and may unleash terror any moment. However, it is our opinion that if all the recommendations suggested in this study are implemented, it will go a long way in addressing the problems.

On a final note, we want to reiterate the fact that the issues involved in sustainable development, environmental degradation and poverty alleviation are interwoven, inter-related and interconnected. And as such none of them can be treated in isolation of the others. So many things have to be done simultaneously. We therefore suggest that any worth while attempt to address the problem of environmental degradation in the Niger Delta must start with environmental degradation. If the environment is exploited in such a way that it is not degraded, this will facilitate sustainable development, then sustainable development will in turn facilitate poverty alleviation.

KEYWORDS Environment. Development. Degradation. Quality of life.

ABSTRACT This study sought to investigate how environmental degradation had impoverished the peoples of the Niger Delta and how this at the same hindered sustainable development. The study made use of both primary and secondary sources of data which include; the literature, observation and in-depth interviews. Data were analyzed using simple percentages. The findings of the study showed that environmental degradation destroyed the ecosystems of the Niger Delta and subsequently led to loss of farm lands, fishing sites and equipments, unemployment, diseases, inadequate reparation and deterioration in the quality of life of the people and also hindered sustainable development in the area. The study made several recommendations to redeem the situation. The study concluded on the note that the issues at stake in environmental degradation are interwoven and multi-dimensional and none can be treated in isolation of others.

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