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THE POLITICAL ECOLOGY OF OIL AND GAS ACTIVITIES IN THE NIGER DELTA REGION OF NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper aims to discuss the challenges in the Niger Delta by using a political ecology approach. The paper observes that the violence and criminality in the Niger Delta region is a product of their struggle for survival and preservation of their environment. The paper concluded by recommending that economic and environmental exploitation is comprehensively transformed to an all-embracing and transparent stakeholders' participation in development decisions in the Niger Delta region.

Keywords: *political ecology; crisis; niger delta; niger delta crisis; environment.*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Niger Delta Region is a large area of southern Nigeria and is home to about thirty million people (Sewell, 2020). It is biodiverse with its mangrove providing carbon sequestration capacity and supporting a large variety of animal and plant life, including fishing and agriculture that many in the area depend on for their livelihoods. It also sits on significant hydrocarbon reserves and is Africa's most important oil-producing region (Sewell, 2020).

The volume of oil that flows from the region provides ninety-five per cent of Nigeria's foreign exchange earnings and eighty per cent of its budgetary revenue (Global Edge, 2020; OPEC, 2020). The constitution of Nigeria bestows the control of all minerals in the country and its territorial waters in the federal government. Likewise, the Petroleum Act of 1969 bequeaths the nation's oil to the federal government (Elum et al., 2016). These have led to the dominance of the petroleum sector by the federal government. At the same time, states and host communities are side-lined in decision making on issues concerning petroleum activities in the region (Elum et al., 2016). Consequently, limited attention is given to the harmful consequence of oil exploration, such as oil spills, gas flares and other significant environmental pollution (Babatunde, 2020). The continuous environmental damage due to oil exploration has exposed the people to pervasive poverty and damaged clean water sources, which has led to frustration and anger in the host communities. This had, in turn, fuelled conflict leading to attacks on oil facilities, pipeline vandalism and other actions leading to civil unrest (Elum et al., 2016; Babatunde, 2020). This paper examines the environmental problems in the Niger Delta Region from a political ecology perspective.

2.0 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Political ecology has been a resourceful link between environmental and social sciences since the 1980s (Bohle and Fünfgeld, 2007). According to Blaike and Brookefield (2015, p.17) "political ecology combines the concerns of ecology and a broadly defined political economy. Together this encompasses the constantly shifting dialectic between society and land-based resources within society itself"

This definition can be referred to as the first-generation concept of political ecology that looked at three main prepositions. First, environmental problems have social, economic and political roots and the control of natural resources are foremost in environmental issues. Second, poverty and environmental deterioration are mutually linked, and third, the emphasis is primarily on the poor

and marginalized with a focus on the role of the government (Bohle and Fünfgeld, 2007). The second generation of political ecology in the 1990s emphasis is on politics, power play, civil society and matters of environmental control. It looked at how environmental regulation, access and property rights played out in the context of social interactions and its contest within the political arena of communities and states. The third generation of the political ecology of the 2000s focuses on liberation ecology and the relationship between environment and politics in environmental security (Bohle and Fünfgeld, 2007).

Political ecology aims to investigate ecological, social sciences with political economy in a bid to develop a disciplinary synthesis. It investigates connections between global and local phenomena in environmental concerns, decision-making, and hierarchies of power. These interconnections come through the actions and practices of government agents, individuals and civil society (Adger et al., 2001).

According to Adger et al. (2001), there are various views and characteristics of political ecology. Firstly, it is influenced by different concepts with multiple points of emphasis and concerns and draws from several academic disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, geography, environmental science and political science. Secondly, there is no one particular approach to political ecology. Thirdly, the scope of political ecology is broad, and It looks at the challenge of scale as environmental issues are to be seen from the context of local, national and international influence. Finally, social and political context affects knowledge about the environment, so social and political power structures affect knowledge about the environment.

Political ecology is based on certain assumptions. The cost and benefits of environmental transformation are not shared equally as political, social and economic disparity account for differing in terms of costs and benefits. The uneven spread of costs and benefits enhances or decreases the social and economic disparity. Transformation in environmental situations affects economic and political situations, and the uneven distribution and the reinforcement of pre-existing disparities hold political consequences for the current power relationships (Okoli, 2013). Over the years, political ecology has been criticized for being too vague because of its simplistic linkage between environmental scarcity, environmental migration and weakened state, which are collectively assumed to cause conflict (Bohle and Fünfgeld, 2007). However, political ecology can be applied by a careful appraisal of actual environment changes to lessen the likelihood of

erroneous environmental claims. Political ecology can be guided by open questions on why events occur and not restrict questions to a particular factor in advance of the investigation (Vayda and Walters, 1999).

Applied to the aim of this essay, the environmental degradation in the area is influenced by the policy of the federal government of Nigeria and the activities of oil multinationals resulting in adverse consequences for the inhabitants.

2.1 Study Area: The Niger Delta Region

The Niger Delta Region of Nigeria is densely populated, covers about 70,000 km² and makes up almost eight per cent of Nigeria's landmass. The area is the world's largest wetland in Africa and the third-largest mangrove forest on earth (Hagemeyer, 2016). It consists of Bayelsa, Rivers, Delta, Akwa Ibom, Cross River, Edo, Abia, Imo and Ondo States. The area has a population of over thirty million people, with about forty ethnic groups speaking over 250 different dialects (Oluwaniyi, 2011).

The swampy terrain made up of vast tropical and fresh forest, aquatic ecosystem and biodiversity essentially form the areas pre-existing political economy and define the livelihood of the inhabitants as farmers, fishers, traders, food processors and local manufacturers. In pre-colonial and colonial times, palm oil was a significant source of export, foreign exchange and income for farmers in the region. Since the discovery of crude oil in 1956 and the emergence of oil activities, the region's economic base has changed (Oluwaniyi, 2018).

The region is well-known for its peculiar history of contributions to Nigeria. The well-endowed agricultural centre area is currently the geographical heart of crude oil exploration, where Nigeria earns ninety-five per cent of its foreign exchange and eighty-six per cent of total export revenue (Global Edge, 2020; OPEC, 2020). Despite the benefits of petroleum to the Nigerian economy, the communities in the region continue to live in poverty. This is strengthened by the revision of the derivation principle of revenue distribution with each administration and the decrease in the federal allocations to oil-producing states from fifty per cent in 1966 to three per cent in the mid-1990s before it was reviewed upwards in 1999 to thirteen per cent derivation (Oluwaniyi, 2018). Continuous environmental damage, deprivation, lack of employment opportunities, poverty, fatality and lack of development in the area has led to a rebellion resulting in the vandalization of oil channels, bunkering, hostage-taking and battle with state forces. Isaac Adaka Boro, an ex-police

officer from the area, mobilized young people into an armed group called the Niger Delta Volunteer Force in 1996. The group declared Niger Delta a republic, vandalized pipelines and confronted government forces in battle. Even though this lasted for just twelve days before they were defeated and arrested, it was enough to breed consciousness in the minds of the Niger Delta people (Sampson, 2009).

Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) was founded in 1990 by Ken Saro Wiwa, a human rights and environmental activist. The organization demanded a greater compensatory share of oil profits and a remedy for environmental degradation. He organized protests in his homeland Ogoni and spoke out forcefully against the Nigerian government and oil companies causing ecological damage in the region. Ken Saro Wiwa and eight fellow activists were executed after being found guilty for alleged complicity in the murders of Ogoni chiefs by a special tribunal that was denounced by foreign human rights groups in 1994 (Ibeh, 2012). This act aroused international condemnation and Nigeria's suspensions and sanctions from several international organizations.

Since then, many armed groups and civil activists have emerged in the region composed mostly of young women and men angry with the lack of development, ecological damage, marginalization, and employment opportunities.

2.2 Niger Delta crisis

Niger Delta crisis is caused by the ongoing social, political, economic and environmental issues in the area due to state predation, corporate social irresponsibility, adverse effects of oil activities and marginalization. These issues are highlighted below.

2.3 State Predation

Asides from heavy military presence to restore order and protect oil installations, the government is nearly absent from the region's rural communities. Protest by inhabitants has resulted in heavy repression by government forces. Since the shooting of protesters in Umuechem in 1990, the execution of activists from Ogoni in 1995, the Odi massacres of 1999 right up to the destruction of properties in the region in 2005, the government has often responded with excessive force to demands made by communities to the government and oil companies (Amnesty International, 2020).

2.4 Oil Companies Corporate Irresponsibility

This refers to the environmental harm done by the oil companies, including oil pollution and gas flares. It also includes adverse effects of oil activities such as poverty, institutional weakness, low diffusion of appropriate technologies, disruptive economic forces and promotion of conflict. Finally, it refers to the neglect by the multinational oil companies of their moral obligation to provide essential socioeconomic amenities such as electricity, job opportunities, portable water, good roads and schools to communities affected by their activities (Okoli, 2013; Oluwaniyi, 2018).

2.5 Environmental Degradation and Abuse

Pollution from the operations of the oil companies has a devastating impact on the vegetation and population of the Niger Delta. The traditional economy in the region is mainly dependent on natural resources, as such, the destructive consequence of oil pollution affects the livelihood of families, particularly farmers and fishers, resulting in hunger and poverty, especially in farming and fishing communities (Elum et al., 2016). Oil spills as resulted in the displacement of farmers without resettlement. It has also resulted in extensive deforestation without adequate replanting practices as fallow periods have been shortened. Industrial pollution, gas flaring and oil spillage pollute the air, land and water in the Niger Delta, thereby making them harmful to public health (Okoli, 2013).

2.6 Socioeconomic Deprivation and Poverty

Oil activities in the region have harmed the means of livelihood of the inhabitants, and unemployment has forced many inhabitants to migrate from their rural homes to urban towns where they are often not guaranteed decent employment (Elum et al., 2016). Despite the government's revenue from the region, the area is still lacking basic amenities such as proper shelter, modern roads, electricity, potable water, and hospitals.

2.7 Political Marginalization

The political class has not been responsive to the ongoing destruction of the area as they have not prioritized their responsibility of protecting the environment and improving the living conditions of the inhabitants. They have refused to enforce regulations that mandate oil companies to operate at the standards that benefit the people and the environment (Elum et al., 2016). There is also perceived marginalization in the area of political and resource control as the inhabitants only get a fraction of the financial benefits while they suffer all the adverse consequences of oil exploration.

This has subsequently led to frustration and the adaptation of strategies such as bunkering, destruction of oil channels and kidnapping in order to draw the attention of the government and oil multinationals to the adverse effects of their exploration to the livelihood of the inhabitants (Okoli, 2013).

2.8 The Political Ecology of Oil Production in the Niger Delta

Energy is the world's lifeblood, as oil and gas have become the major energy source for the increasing world population. However, the clear benefits of oil and gas consumption can cause substantial environmental impacts such as air pollution, climate change, and oil spills (Kharaka and Dorsey, 2005). The operations in the region is a genuine threat to Niger Delta's environmental security, ecological balance and sustainable development. Despite the luxury of resources in the region, the area's inhabitants are still very poor and lack basic amenities such as access to shelter, electricity and clean water. Apparently, oil spillage has damaged their fishing stock and farmland which is their primary means of survival and by so leading to loss of livelihood. Essentially, the inhabitants tend to perceive the oil multinationals and the government as aggressors whose activities are associated with the adverse outcome on the land and the inhabitants.

The table below illustrates the potential impact of oil activities in the Niger Delta.

Table 1: The impact of oil exploration on the environment in the Niger Delta

S No.	Activity/ Event	Actual and Potential Impact on the Environment
1	Exploration, including geological survey and geophysical investigations	-Destruction of forest land, vegetation and farmland/human settlement. -Adverse effects on animals and nearby settlers (onshore) and on fisheries (near/offshore). -Disturbances/destruction of flora and fauna habitats.
2	Product/ Process	-Pollution of water from long term cumulative effects (with high salinity). -Air pollution from gas and processing evaporation and flaring. - Production of heat affects vegetation around the heated area and suppresses the growth and flowering of some plants.
3	Drilling	-Accumulation of toxic materials, oil pollution in the sea, beaches or land. -Destruction of the breeding ground for some marine fisheries. -The killing of bottom dwellers.
4	Refining	-Air pollution and wastewater negatively impact the ecosystem
5	Oil Spillage	-Land and marine resources are destroyed. -Pollutes the water
6	Tanker Loading Location	-Deck drainage, spillage during the loading operation.
7	Depot Storage	-Effluent water and solid waste of chemical cans pollutes the land
8	Transportation	-Destruction of the environmentally sensitive area such as lowland, where estuaries, wetlands and dune fields exist. -Erosion and flooding of the area exposed to the activity.

Source: Adapted from (Okoli, 2013)

Since oil activities began in the Niger Delta region in 1958, the Nigerian civilian and military government have forged a very close linkage with multinational oil companies anchored on transactions that cannot be referred to as transparent. It can be assumed that the government's dependence on revenue and royalties has led the state to ally these multinationals rather than to protect the strategic interest of Nigeria and its citizens (Amuwo, 2009).

The gross violation of generic and human rights of the region's inhabitants through oil spillage and gas flaring at an alarming rate leading to the devastation of wildlife, farmland, forests, marine and human lives, show flagrant lack of sensitivity to the condition of the people whose future appears insecure. It is worthy to note that even though revenues from oil have suffered on account of the violence in the region through suspension of oil operations in volatile areas, the Nigerian government is still devoted to its alliance with the multinational oil companies without any genuine policy towards lessening the problems in the region (Amuwo, 2009).

3.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

The Nigerian government should negotiate with a wide range of Niger Deltans on contentious issues such as resource control, derivation formula and compensation for oil spills. The Petroleum Act and Land Use Act legislation should be reformed and replaced with a local ownership policy. The state governments in the region should implement economic reforms to ensure that government allocations are spent on projects that benefit the people (Crisis Group, 2006). Multinational oil companies should make their environmental impact assessment (EIA) studies transparent and accessible to the communities and encourage corporate transparency by making reports on expenditure, including the cost of development and payments to the government, communities and contractors available to the public. They should revise partnerships to include local participation and ownership by collaborating with government and local groups (Crisis Group, 2006). They should also improve the monitoring of oil infrastructure to prevent sabotage and implement the best available technology to prevent oil spills (Amnesty International, 2013). The international community should encourage the Nigerian government to reform legislation such as the Petroleum Act, discourage heavy-handed military operations in the region and press for transparency in the country's oil industry.

4.0 CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to identify the ecological problems associated with oil activities with an account of political ecology in the Niger Delta, where the bulk of Nigeria's oil and gas is produced. In summary, the paper has highlighted the adverse effects of oil pollution and the hardship that oil producing communities suffer in the event of oil pollution. The essay concluded with some recommendations on how the problems can be ameliorated.

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