Illegal Oil Bunkering and the Environment of the Niger Delta of Nigeria

By

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Abstract

The Niger Delta environment has been threatened since oil was discovered in 1956. The people of the area have been critical of the activities of the oil companies on the ground that oil exploration destroys the region's environment. On the catastrophic effects of oil exploration on the region's environment, the youths founded the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) to charge the oil companies and the Nigerian Government of environmental degradation. However, in recent times, the youth carried out illegal oil bunkering, which has posed more ecological threats to the region than the people charged the oil companies with. On this note, this paper examines illegal oil bunkering and the Niger Delta environment. The paper argues illegal oil bunkering destroys the Niger Delta's environment more than the oil company's activities. The paper further argues that idleness on the part of the youth is a factor that promotes illegal oil bunkering. Using qualitative methods of research, the paper concludes that job creation in the form of the building industries that will harness the by-products of crude oil will go a long way to address the challenge of illegal oil bunkering in the Niger Delta. Furthermore, the local knowledge and technology of the people of the region should be harnessed to eradicate poverty.

Introduction

The Niger Delta is the mainstay of Nigeria's economy, accounting for about 90 percent of the country's foreign exchange. The region drew global attention since oil was discovered in 1956. Among the organizations of petroleum exporting countries (OPEC), Nigeria is the sixth largest oil exporting country. The

exploration of oil in the region subjected the region to environmental degradation. According to D.S.P Alamiegeseigha, the valuable treasure nature deposited freely in Niger Delta to support life in the region has been used by the Nigerian State to the disadvantage of the area. Putting the welfare of the people of the region into consideration in terms of observing international standards in oil exploration activities is missing in Nigeria. The Nigerian State has paid a deaf ear to the precarious environmental condition of oil exploration in the region.[i]

The exploration of oil has destroyed the ecology of the Niger Delta, and this has endangered the traditional livelihood of the people of the region. Ighodalo Ejemheare notes that oil exploration is associated with gas flaring, oil spills, seismic operation, and construction of location roads, and the above oil activities have damaged the environment of the Niger Delta in no small measure. The devastating effects of oil exploration on the region have adversely affected the area's economy.[ii] "the devastation of the environment means the destruction of the local knowledge and technology of the people of the Niger Delta, and this sinks the people into poverty."[iii] Before the discovery of oil in the region, farming, fishing, gin distilling, and hunting wild animals contributed to the economic boom the area experienced. The region experienced a decline in the aforementioned economic activities due to the environmental devastation occasioned by oil exploration. Onduku Akpobibib maintains that "the environment is in crisis globally, and the Niger Delta situation is such a pathetic one due to the degree of devastation done to it and the complexity of the crisis."[iv]

The fact cannot be denied that youth restiveness in the Niger Delta is rooted in the marginalization and environmental degradation of the region by oil companies. Philip Okolo attests that "the resistive youth in the Niger Delta region has every right to protest or struggle over the unprecedented assaults on their environment."[v] The attempt by the Niger Delta youth to agitate against the marginalization and devastation of their environment has led to the massacre of the youths. The hanging of Ken Saro Wiwa and nine Ogoni sons by Abacha's military Government is a testimony to the use of state power to silence genuine agitators for the restoration of their environmental rights.

The genuine agitation by the youth of the Niger Delta for the restoration of their ecological right has been abused and misdirected as the youth of the region carry out illegal oil bunkering, which poses more danger to the environment than the activities of the oil companies. This paper examines the devastating effects of illegal oil bunkering on the Niger Delta environment. The paper is divided into four parts. It starts with the introduction, which is followed by conceptual clarification, and this is followed by illegal oil bunkering and the Niger Delta environment. It ends with the conclusion and recommendation.

Conceptual Clarification

The Niger Delta

The Niger Delta is the largest wetland in Africa and the third globally. The region is in the southern parts of Nigeria. The area is spread across a landmass of about 70,000km, and the area is made up of over 2000 communities across all the Niger Delta states. According to Steve Azaiki:

> Niger Delta is traversed and crisscrossed by a large number of rivers, streams, brooks, creeks, and twenty estuaries- Forcados, Escravos, Benin and Ramos in the Western Hanks and Dodo, Pennington Digotoru, Middleton, Koluama, Fishtown, Sangama, Nun, Brass, St. Nicholas, San Barbara, San Bartholomew, New Kalambari, Audoni, and Opobo.[vi]

Out of Nigeria's 36 states, the Niger Delta is spread across Nine states. They include Rivers, Bayelsa, Delta, Edo, Abia, Ondo, Imo, Akwa Ibom and Cross River. S.O Jaja notes that the term Niger Delta has been viewed differently. The areas making up the lower part of the river Niger close to the coast are the most popular.[vii] The area houses the largest mangrove in the world, and it is the most densely populated delta globally.

Nyananyo et al. note that "the region is the most physiographic section of Nigeria that protrudes into the Gulf of Guinea and covers about 480km of the coastline of Nigeria from Oni River in the west to the Andoni River in the East."[viii] The region's population is about 21 million, and in the opinion of many Nigerians, the region has been categorized as the oil-producing part of the country. In Ighodalo Ejemheare's submission:

> The Niger Delta is the home of the Itsekiri, the Urhobo, the Ijaw, the Calabari, the Ibeno and the Efik people. The region is also home to the Ikwere, Kwale, and Ibibios. The Niger Delta has always been a focal point, even before the discovery of oil. The slave trade and the legitimate trade drew the world's attention to this region long ago. The slave trade provided lucrative wealth because the area underwent a political and social transformation. This development led to the emergence of City-States. The most important were Sapele, Warri, Akassa, Nembe, Buguma, Abonnema, Bonny, Duke Town, and Creek Town. The 1808 abolition of the slave trade also transformed the economy of this region as the main products of legitimate business, such as palm oil, were available in the area. The availability of palm oil, the main article of the legitimate trade in the region, made the Europeans call the region Oil River in the 18th and 19th centuries.[ix]

In the present division of Nigeria into six geographical zones, the Niger Delta is spread across six states of the south-south geo-political zone. They include Bayelsa, Edo, Rivers, Delta, Cross River, and Akwa Ibom. The act establishing the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) expanded the frontiers of the Niger Delta to include Ondo, Imo, and Abia. However, the original Niger Delta groups are still known in the South/South geo-political zone. The occupations of the original Niger Delta are fishing, canoe building, gin distilling, palm oil production, and farming.

The Niger Delta was spread across the Midwest and Eastern region when Nigeria was four regions. Ighodalo notes that "the soul of Nigeria state is in the Niger Delta. Apart from being the supplier of the bulk of the wealth of the Nigerian State, the Niger Delta has played a major role in determining the statehood of Nigeria."[x] The region played a significant role in amalgamating the Northern and Southern Protectorates in 1914. The British Colonial Government found out they were spending the British taxpayer's money for the administration of the Northern Protectorate. On the other hand, the South had a budget surplus, which was attributed to the coaster locations in the South, which promoted trade. Ode affirms this:

> The desire did not inform the British to move toward amalgamation to create the Nigerian Nation State; instead, their concern was the efficiency of colonial administration. Thus, the amalgamation exercise was meant to tackle the North's inability to balance its budget at a time when its Southern neighbor had a robust surplus.[xi]

Ajala also attests to this:

> As a matter of emphasis, the British Colonial Office that appointed Lugard to amalgamate the two separate protectorates was only concerned with combining the North's financial deficit with the South's annual surplus and uniting the competing railway networks.[xii]

The Niger Delta is about 3.2 percent of the overall land area of Nigeria. Steve Azaiki argues that the fact that a state is oil-producing does not make it Niger Delta. He declares that states not traditionally Niger Delta should be categorized as oil producing, not Niger Delta. Azaiki calls for changing the 1999 Niger Delta Development Commission to the Oil Producing Commission.[xiii] Oil exploration has resulted in environmental degradation in the region, adversely affecting farmland and aquatic life and even endangering people's health.

Environment

Conceptualizing an environment can be difficult because scholars have different views on its meaning. Nyananyo et al. see the environment as "the entire range of external influences working on an organism, both physical and biological forces of nature surrounding an individual."[xiv] In Steve Azaiki's submission environment, "is the existing set of surroundings that affects activities. It includes the material and spiritual influences that affect the growth, development, and existence of a living being."[xv] Before the Industrial Revolution, man had a negligible impact on the environment. Exploiting natural resources and using machines for economic production have threatened our environment and made the need to protect it imperative. The wealth created from human activities that threatened the environment could not make them neglect the need to preserve it.[xvi] Thus, the rise of environmentalism became a cardinal issue in the twenty-

first century. Oil exploration in the Niger Delta has posed a serious environmental challenge to the region.

Oil pollution's impact on farming and fishing engagement in the region over the years has adversely affected the region's economy. Gas flaring, oil spillage, and air pollution also adversely affect farmland and marine life in the region. Oil bunkering has resulted in a high proportion of crude loss to the environment, posing a severe ecological challenge to the area.

Illegal Oil Bunkering and the Niger Delta Environment

The Niger Delta youth agitated against the adverse effects of oil exploration on their environment as soon as oil was discovered in the area in 1956. The people were conscious that oil exploration in their domain fell short of international environmental standards. The oil companies and the Federal Government did not adhere to the necessary laws governing oil exploration operations—the people of the region called for a law to address their plight.[xvii] The people believed that the laws being used to regulate oil exploration, the environment, and the communities in the region were anachronistic and, therefore, did not conform to international standards. They think "that petroleum development is primarily designed to aid Nigeria's economic development at the expense of the region."[xviii] The people initially resulted in court litigation against the Nigerian State and the oil companies. Still, the expensive nature of court proceedings and other procedural and technical hindrances of the court system could not give them justice.

An attempt by the people to call for the restoration of their environmental rights was met with intimidation, threat, detention, arrest, and execution without a fair hearing.[xix] This cruelty toward the people for demanding the restoration of their environmental rights and the development of their region pushes the people into restiveness. The people of the area were aggrieved that despite the oil wealth in their domain, the region's poverty rate was very high. Olua Lamalu, the deputy president of MOSOP, maintains that the first oil was struck in Ogoni in 1958. For over 30 years, the Nigerian State has realized over 30 billion Dollars from Ogoni land without Ogoni having anything to show in return. The oil operation started

in Ogoni without any environmental impact assessment study. Lamalu lamented that the benefit they derived from having oil in their land was:

> Environmental pollution and degradation lead to health hazards, hunger, tears, and wear on their structures and artifacts. Our sons and daughters with good degrees are roaming the streets while those with a B.A. in Arabic find jobs in chemical plants.[xx]

Patterson Ogon, the director of the Ijaw Council for Human Rights, also lamented that:

> Crude oil, supposed to be a source of collective joy, had become our primary source of sorrow. And our suffering is daily borne in ecological devastation, in an impoverished people who can no longer live sustainable lives due to the pollution of their land and sea; in the total absence of the necessities of life, the militarization of the communities for the sake of oil profits; and in the emergence of intra and inter-ethnic conflicts sponsored by oil transnational corporations.[xxi]

The challenge above replicated itself in all the oil-producing communities in the region. The people demanded self-determination, true federalism, resource control, and demilitarization of the area. The Nigerian State and the multinational oil companies remained insensitive to the cry against the underdevelopment and ecological devastation of the region's environment. Isaac Adaka Boro was sentenced to life imprisonment for forming the Niger Delta Volunteer Force; Ken Saro Wiwa was executed by hanging for calling for the restoration of the environmental right of the Ogoni people; the Umuechem community in River State was burned to ashes because the people demonstrated against the multinational oil industries.[xxii]

The continued exploitation of the oil resources in the area without compensation for the environmental damage gave rise to youth restiveness. The restiveness was meant to seek redress for over sixty years of deprivation.[xxiii] The restiveness is in the form of the kidnapping of oil workers, pipeline vandalization, and oil theft. Ade Abolurin had attributed poverty as a major cause of pipeline vandalization and oil theft in the region. He described poverty in the area as people

intentionally neglected by the government by refusing to put social programmes in place that would improve the social conditions of the citizens.[xxiv] Most of the youths in the area are jobless. Ighodalo notes that Environmental degradation is a significant cause of poverty, and poverty is a major factor in illegal oil bunkering in the Niger Delta. Those in the illicit oil refining business are driven to desperate action by poverty and hopelessness. The breakdown of law and order is attributed to poverty and unemployment in the area.[xxv] According to Ighodalo:

> The breakdown of law and order in the Niger Delta started in the form of genuine agitation for resource control, environmental degradation, and long years of marginalization and neglect of the region. The agitation was transformed into an armed militant group by jobless youth whose parents lost their income due to the devastation of their environment, which damaged their prospects in life. The destruction of their means of livelihood affected the parent's income adversely, making them incapable of planning for their offspring.[xxvi]

It is antithetical that the militant youth who claimed that their deprivation and frustration stem from the ecological degradation by the multinational oil companies have done monumental environmental damage to the region's environment through illegal oil bunkering. It implies that today, the region's youths are part of the ecological disaster.

The youth initiate linkages in oil pipes, which they may be unable to control after taking oil from it. The line is left spilling over the place, attracting villagers to come and scoop oil from the vandalized pipe. The youth initiates the linkage to get crude for illegal refining. The unlawful refineries are almost in parts of the Niger Delta. "The crude oil is placed into barrels and heated at a high temperature, and the product being processed are gasoline, diesel, and kerosene… The risk involved in illegal oil bunkering is enormously high, with many fatalities reported."[xxvii] Oil theft adversely affects the revenue of all tiers of Government, which can pose a setback to the citizens' social welfare provisions. Oil bunkering can also sustain conflict as the perpetrators use the proceeds to buy weapons, which they use to engage law enforcement agents in battles to maintain their business. Furthermore, oil theft can increase the unemployment rate in the

region as oil companies are known to have left their onshore venture due to oil theft, leading to job cuts in the area. The focus of this paper is the implications of illegal oil bunkering on the Niger Delta's environment. The environmental damage occasioned by illegal oil bunkering put the people of the Niger Delta's survival in jeopardy.

A study by New Castle University, United Kingdom, and Niger Delta University, Bayelsa State, Nigeria, in 2020 revealed the adverse effects of oil bunkering on host communities in the region. The impacts are on the creeks, rivers, farmland, and air. "They ignore principles of environmental protection in refining the crude oil and empty the residue after cooking the crude into nearby rivers and water bodies."[xxviii] The consequences of ignoring safety standards are catastrophic. Natural gas is released into the atmosphere by siphoning the crude from the pipeline. Heating the crude, which is in the distillation stage, emits a large quantity of soot into the atmosphere, which has an adverse health effect on people. As a result, most host communities and even state capitals like Port Harcourt and Yenagoa, properties, and even humans are exposed to soot.

The former Governor of Rivers State, Barr. Nyose Wike set up a committee to look into the menace of soot in the State, and the committee came out with the report that in five years, there are over 27,000 health cases of respiratory illness traceable to soot as a result of illegal oil refining in the State.[xxix] Illegal oil bunkering has almost the same environmental consequences as gas flaring and oil spillage attributed to accidents on the part of the oil company. On April 30, 2021, the Guardian newspaper reported that four persons died from a fire outbreak at an illegal oil refining location between Rumunji and Ibaa forest in Rivers State.[xxx] In April 2022, over 100 persons were killed due to an explosion in an illegal oil refining location at Abaezi forest in Ohaji/Egbema Local Government Area of Imo State. In October 2021, over 25 persons were killed in an explosion in an illegal refining site in Rumuekpe community in Rivers State.[xxxi] Apart from the loss of human life, those who survived are maimed for life and become dependent. The fire also destroys forests and fauna, adversely affecting the arable land's nutrients. Land and rivers are the two significant factors that sustain the region's economy.

Illegal oil bunkering invariably endangers the health of the people. Adverse health conditions such as cancer, lung, and skin disorders are in sight in host communities. The adverse health condition subjects people to the extra responsibility of caring for themselves and sick loved ones. The care of sick loved ones can result in people not being productive and adversely affect their savings.[xxxii] The health-related problem is compounded because the high poverty rate hinders the people from seeking orthodox medicine as the herbal medicine within their rich has been destroyed due to the environmental devastation occasioned by oil exploration.[xxxiii]

Conclusion and Reconmendation

This paper examined the relationship between illegal oil bunkering and the Niger Delta environment. The paper finds out that the Niger Delta struggle, which started as genuine agitation for the restoration of environmental rights, has been abused by the youth through illegal oil bunkering, which poses a more devastating effect on the environment. Since illegal refining is the handwork of jobless youth, the Government should embark on massive employment creation for the youths by creating industries that will harness crude oil and all the by-products. "Harnessing the indigenous knowledge and local technology of the people of the Niger Delta must not be left out in government poverty alleviation programmes."[xxxiv] The government can incentivize them to embark on fish farming and gin distilling since these are the people's areas of specialization locally. The unemployment rate is minimal among the Fulani ethnic group because the parents bequeath the knowledge of their local animal husbandry to their young ones. True federalism can go a long way to restore to the people what belongs to them. It can lead to massive infrastructural development in the region

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