The Nexus between Water Bodies, Petroleum Resources and Poverty in the Niger-Delta of Nigeria (1956-1999)

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Abstract

As an enigma, the coastal waters of the Niger- Delta of Nigeria, beginning from time immemorial, has been a symbolism of metaphorical story of wealth and poverty, problems and prospects. From recorded history therefore, like the great Sahara Desert, the coastal waters of the Niger-delta has played pivotal historical roles as both a link and barrier to Nigeria's socio- economic interactions with the wider world. Regrettably however, the traditional economic roles which the waters of the Niger-Delta availed were historically upset beginning from the 15th Century with the advent of European mercantilist predators, whose imperial interest in the African continent occasioned the introduction of the historic and ill-fated human commoditization. As a process in motion, the 1950's discovery of oil in the Niger-Delta and its surrounding waters added yet another dimension to the consequential collateral implications of the presence of the coastal waters on Niger-Delta. In view of the fore going therefore, the present scholarly effort is intended to x-ray the role of oil in the Niger-Delta waters in relation to its socio-economic impacts on the Niger- Delta, and by extension Nigeria. To achieve the object of the present scholarly task, the researcher employed historical methods such as thematic and analytical approach, while anchoring on secondary materials for data

collection and re- interpretation.

Key words: Niger-Delta, coastal waters, oil, militancy, socio- economic.

Introduction:

Beginning from the 1950's when oil was discovered in the Niger- Delta area, Nigeria's economic attention was shifted from her core traditional economic activities to oil resources. Thus, by this inevitable shift in economic attention, the Niger- Delta region became the epicenter of multiple socio economic attention with Myriads of concomitant political implications.

Thus, for the purpose of clarity, the geographical areas called the Niger- Delta – an area which this exercise sets out to discuss is divided into two along economic and political lines. The economic Niger- Delta includes, Rivers state, Bayelsa, Delta, Akwaibom, and Cross River States. These five states are found within the mangrove, swampy-tropical rain forest. The humidity here is high with intense rain which starts early in the region and ends quite late in the year. On the other hand, the political Niger- Delta includes Imo, Abia, Ondo, and Edo state; all together, there are nine statesthat have been categorized as the Niger- Delta states of Nigeria. With intense oil exploration and exploitation which often perturbed the area's ecosystem, the formerly prevailed peace which the inhabitants of thee area enjoyed was lost at the point when oil was discovered and exploitation began in commercial quantity. Coupled with these troubles which were brought about by oil exploration, were the menace of ocean surge, oil spillage and associate conflicts which were born out of oil politics and associate political conspiracies.[1]

With the area's water bodies which harbor Nigeria's oil deposits, and as the major source of Nigeria's economic mainstay, the entire Niger- Delta consequently became Nigeria's center stage for escalated poverty, militancy and crises; yet, a celebrated epicenter of Nigeria's material and human resource abundance and economic power house. With these contradictions, one wonders what an enigma the Niger-Delta and it's body water have become.

Interestingly, the socio- economic contradictions which the Niger- Delta represents have qualified the region as truly the county's enigma. Hence the need for this study which is solely devoted to investigate the history of the region's oil exploration, the politics of oil, the role of oil giants in the region, the, oil induced crises and government pacification efforts to ensure continued exploitation of oil in the water bodies of Niger-Delta, as well as the unpatriotic roles of both the traditional rulers and political leader in the region which ensured continued impoverishment of the people of the region

Theoretical Frame Work:

The conflicts and agitations which were common places in the Niger- Delta region cannot be said to be a result of the presence of, and exploitation ofoil in the water bodies of Niger- Delta alone, but also, a result of the lopsided oil revenue distribution and re-distribution policies of the Federal Government, as well as the failure of oil prospecting companies in the area to sincerely and patriotically implement their corporate responsibilities to the oil bearing communities.

The obvious injustices meted against the real owners of the oil, which renders them incapable of solving their daily economic needs, and to develop their communities, were at the roots of the poverty, militancy and scarcity to which the inhabitants of the region were subjected. In view of these therefore, The Human Needs Theory of conflict which was developedby Rosati et- al, appropriately explains the situation in the region.

In details, the Human Needs Theory of Conflicts states that all human beings have some basic needs which they seek to fulfill, the denial or frustration of these needs by some groups or individuals would ultimately lead to, or generate conflicts,[3]and consequently result to underdevelopment. As can be seen, the deprivations and economic denials to which the region's peoples were subjected constitute the remote, the facilitator and the trigger of conflicts and underdevelopment in the Niger-Delta region, hence its adoption as a suitable theory for the present study.

The Roots of Oil Exploration and Exploitation in the Water Bodies of Niger- Delta:

The history of oil exploration and exploitation in the water bodies of Niger- Delta may be incomplete if the account undermines the pre- 1956 attempts at oil

discovery in the upland areas of Okitipupa in the Lagos axis and Iho near Owerri in Imo State.

Historically, the search for oil in Nigeria pre- dated the 1956 discovery of oil resources in the areas which later became Bayelsa. According to Lawrence Atsegbua, the search for oil in Nigeria is rooted in the 1908 German Bitumen firms attempt at Okitipupa- an area geographically measured to about 200 Kilometers east of Lagos.[4]However, the oil yield from this earliest effort was not encouraging because the oil that was discovered here was not discovered in commercial quantity, hence the abandonment of the site.

However, the search for oil was continued beyond the areas of Lagos, upto Iho in Imo state, South-east of Nigeria. According to Akpo Mudiaga Odje, the search for oil continued up to 1937 by Shell Petroleum Development Company, which was then known as Shell D' Archy- which was later renamed Shell BP, then based in Warri.[5]The search for oil was temporarily suspended in 1941, due to the out-break of World War II. Never the less, in 1945, Shell resumed its search for oil in Iho area of Imo state, and had her first oil Well drilled in Iho in 1951, but not much oil was found. Not deterred by the unsuccessful results of these earlier attempts, Shell also drilled another site at Akata I in 1953.[6]The Akata Wellwas later suspended in 1954. In 1956, at Oloibiri in the then River State, Shell successfully drilled a site which yielded oil in commercial quantity. Following this success, Shell BP was prompted to relocate its operational base from Shell Camp area in Amakohia, Owerri, to Port Harcourt in River State.

Consequent upon the success at Oloibiri and Afam, the first oil pipe line connections between Oloibiri and Port Harcourt was constructed and the first cargo of crude oil left Nigeria in February, 1958, when production stood at 6000 barrels per day.[8]Resulting from Shell's successful entry into Niger-Delta's Oil Field, other multinational oil firms gradually infiltrated the region's oil environment. For instance, in 1962, ELF –then known as SAFRAP joined the race for oil exploration in the Niger-Delta first, in Obagi and Ubata Gas Fields.[9]in 1964, Agip found its first oil at Ebocha. Following these success stories was Philip oil which drilled its first Well – though dried, at Osani in 1967.[10]In 1968, Mobile

Producing Nigeria limited, was created; and her first Gulf's Terminal at Escravos was commissioned. In 1970, Mobile drilled her first oil Well at Idoho field.[11]

As the years rolled by, more events in the oil and gas industry began to unfold. For instance, Shell's Forcados Terminal was commissioned in 1971. Following this historic land-mark event in 1971, was the commissioning of Mobil's Terminal at Qua-Iboe.[12] Following this historic event was thesigning of the first participatory agreement which led to the acquisition of about 35% shares in oil companies by Federal Government of Nigeria in 1973.[13] In the same year however, Pan-Ocean Corporation drilled her first oil Well at Osharefe, while Agip lifted her first oil from Brass Terminal in 1975.[14]

Scarcity in the Face of Abundant Resources; The Niger-Delta Road to Poverty.

When the purpose for which oil resources was given to a people by divine providence, became adulterated, manipulated, dominated and denied the masses of the people by whomsoever and for whatever reason, the system and its peoples, begin an inevitable journey into the abyss of underdevelopment. The affected peoples also lose their chances of self- regulated development to imperial gods, who decide for them when to develop, how to develop, what to develop and at what pace to develop.[15] This has been the best way to describe the socio-economic and political state of the Niger-Delta region since the advent of oil based economy and its subsequent manipulation by both the Nigerian government and the international oil consortium.

As embarrassing as the Niger-Delta economic situation had been, what seemed to be an excruciating case of poverty in the midst of resource abundance to which the region had been subjected- especially the rural inhabitants, appeared to be the avoidable result of clear absence of climate of transparent justice, equitable management of the peoples resources, judicious distribution and redistribution of the resources that were derived from the area, as well as the mindless and unmitigated exploitation and exploration of oil resources in the region. Worst still, in some instances when government and multination oil companies were pressured by the region's economic agitators to return part of what they took from the region,

the returned part of the loots were re-looted by indigenouspolitical actors and comprador elites, who have over the years, manipulated themselves into unmerited political positions, as leaders and deciders of the economic and political fate of the region's inhabitants.

Lamenting over the pitiable state to which the region was subjected, Odje informed that the goose that lays the golden egg has been, and still deniedof egg even the nutrient less shells of the egg; while parts of the country which have not experienced any form of environmental devastation, have tremendously been feeding fat on the nutritious egg of the battered Niger- delta.[16]even though that the above expression by Odje, may appear too extreme to explain the state of Niger-delta visa viz the economic condition in the region, the hard truth was that, the socio-economic and political situation in Niger-delta were terrible, dehumanizing and visibly excruciating.

Niger-Delta and the Agents of Economic Oppression:

All economic and political gladiators that operated in the Niger-Delta region have been roundly blamed for the systemic and persistent processes that have avoidably led to the impoverishment of the people of the region. These acts of impoverishment have evidently been demonstrated in various principles of economic deprivation, derivation and re-distribution policies of the Federal Government of Nigeria vis a viz the component states of the Niger-Delta. Described by political commentators and analysts as faceless policies designed to produce faceless people, Itase Sagay, in one of his analysis, unveiled the Federal-State percentage in petroleum proceed from 1960 to 1999, as can be seen in the table below:

Table 1: Federal-State Percentage In Resource

	Allocation	**Between**	**1960 to 1999**
S/N	**Year**	**Producing state**	**Federal government**
1	1960-1967	50%	50%
2	1967-1969	50%	50%
3	1969-1971	45%	55%
4	1971-1975	45% minus off shore	55% plus off shore proceeds

		proceeds	
5	1975-1979	20% minus off shore proceeds	60% plus off proceeds
6	1979-1981	NIL	100%
7	1982-1992	½%	98/2 percent
8	1992-1999	3%	97%
9	1999	13%	87%

Source: Prof. Itse Saggy: (SAN),The Vanguard News Paper of 24/5/2002, P.8

The above table shows clear case of gross manipulation by Federal Government against oil bearing states beginning from 1960. It was, indeed,the root of poverty and scarcity in the Niger- Delta. Aside of these obvious manipulations, other policies and acts and laws of the Federal Government of Nigeria against the component Niger- Delta states included; The Territorial Water Act, The Exclusive Economic Zone Act, The Land Use Act, The Oil Pipeline Act, The Mineral and Mining Act, and the Natural Inland Water Act.[17]

From the time these acts became operational, not much has been seen as concrete evidence in terms of capacity of the acts to sufficiently bail the indigenes of the Delta region from abject poverty and economic penury. Instead, what obtained was enrichment of a few Northern booth leakers, who happily fed from the crumps that emanated from the proceeds that came from the revenue derived from Niger-Delta. Adebola Babatunde contends that, the noticeable cases of poverty and scarcity in the region were the results of negligence and un-ethical economic activities of oil prospecting companies that operated in the region.

Added to this was the irresponsible and largely corrupt state, local and federal government officials, whose oppressive policies and fraudulent practices were known to have induced much of the poverty evidently experienced by the indigenes of the oil bearing communities.[18]Should the oil operators in the region carry out their corporate responsibilities to the communities that beer the oil, such would be taken to underscore the intelligent and objective concern for the welfare of society that restrains individuals and corporate behavior from ultimate destructive activities, and leads in the direction of positive contribution to human betterment.[19]

Besides the secrecy involved in the payment of oil revenue to the Federal Government of Nigeria, against which the Niger-Deltans have incessantly demanded to no avail, that such payments, for transparency and integrity sake, be made open to the people of the region who, as a matter of rights, were entitled to know the value of revenue that goes to Federal Government from the resources derived from the region.

Again, the regrettable case of environmental pollution which were consequent upon the activities of oil companies deserve attention as part of the failures on the part of the oil companies to protect the Niger-Delta environment. Writing on this, Imam Williams observed that; a report from the Ministry of Petroleum Resource shows that between 1976 and 1990, there were 2,676 reported cases of oil spillages in the Niger-Delta, and thatbetween 1976 and 1991, almost 3000 separate oil spills, averaging 700 barrels of oil each, occurred in the Niger-Delta.[20]

A similarly, but independent report by the Civil Liberty Organization (CLO), informs that going by existing estimate, anything up to two and a half million barrels of oil have polluted the Niger- Delta environment since exploration of oil was first carried out in the area. Out of this, approximately three quarters was lost to the delicate ecosystem of Africa's largest wet-land, containing as it were, "the high bio-diversity characteristic of extensive swamp and forest areas with many unique species of plants and animals.[21]

These observed unfortunate realities in the Niger-Delta regarding the operational activities of multinational oil firms, as well as the obvious lackof enabling laws, or the inability of Nigerian Government to effectivelycheck the activities of oil companies in the region, have been noted to be the roots of decadence, scarcity and poverty that ravaged the region. The scenario in the Niger-Delta beginning from the engagement of oil prospecting companies and government's penchant for the revenue that accrue from such engagement, is akin to the proverbial quotation of Ralph Waldo Emerson, in which he observed that; the highest civility has never loved the hot zone; where ever snow falls, there is usually civil freedom; where the banana grows, man is usually sensual and cruel; it is therefore, the reaction to this cruelty against the people of Niger-Delta, where the cruelty that fed the foundation

of insurgency and minority agitations were sustained. These insurgencies and ethnic agitations have been exacerbated by the introduction of the controversial Off-shore/On-shore Dichotomy, and by so doing, enhanced the crises that rocked the foundation of oil bearing communities. Other government policies and laws that lacked human face and consequently militated against the development of the Niger-Delta region included; the Principle of Derivation, the Resource Control Saga, the Continental shelve enshrined in 1969 Constitution and the 200 Nautical Miles Principle established in 1978. All these principles and laws were created to check the wealth that emanated from Niger-Delta region.

Oil in the Waters, Agitations in the Land:

In all these, the white cola jobs which the oil based economy promised were beyond the reach of the indigenous people of the area, consequent upon which top and choice positions in the oil firms were dominated by persons from other geographical zones of the country. The economichardship this rather lopsided economic reality portended was another source of agitations and conflicts in the Niger-Delta- agitations which were aimed at equitable Oil revenue distribution in the region and politicalinclusion of its citizens.

Aside of the agitations which were organized by the minorities of Nigeria which also included the Niger-delta peoples that led to the establishment ofthe Hicks Philipson Commission, whose report of 1951 attempted to capture a balanced revenue sharing formula between states and the Federal Government; the Riesman Commission's Report of 1958, which also suggested a revenue distribution to address minority agitation; andthe Chicks Commission's report of 1953, which attempted a fair revenue sharing model to stem the tide of minority agitations for economic inclusion,[22]the Willink Commission of 1957/1958 was a major Colonial Government's bold effort aimed at holistic address of the development need of the Niger-Delta peoples.

The Willink Commission, after painstaking effort in studying the development need of the Niger-Delta region, recommended that, *the Niger-Delta situation is a matter which requires a special effort, and the corporation of the Federal, Eastern and Western Government. it does not concern one region only. Not only because itis poor,*

backward and neglected, the entire nation of Nigeria is concerned, we suggest there should be a federal board appointed toconsider the problems of the areas of the Niger-Delta.[23]

This recommendation, if implemented, would have served as the suiting balm which Niger-Delta needed to address the development challenges that faced the region. But at the exit of the Colonial Government from Nigeria in 1960, in 1976 through counter military offensive, the emergent military junta annulled the provisions of the Willink Commission's report and the 1960/1963 Constitution of Nigeria, which provided for over 50% mineral deviation to the Oil producing region.

Aside of these agitations which resulted in the creation of the various commissions as discussed above, the early 1960s saw the agitation of Isaac Adaka Boro- an Ijo son. This agitation was aimed at extricating the Niger-delta region from Nigeria. it was also aimed to call government's attention to the multiple political and economic injustices to which the Niger-delta region was subjected by the Nigeria state. With increased government laze-fair attitude to the rights of the region's inhabitants,coupled with the rise in multinational oil companies' exploitations of the resource of the area without corresponding implementation of their agreed social and corporate responsibilities to the people of the region, therearose, in the early years of 2000, some armed uprising organized by the youths of oil bearing communities.

The stated objectives of the armed groups were to protect oil bearing communities from the menace of oil induced poverty and to call government attention to the endemic economic and ecological hazardoccasioned by the mindless activities of oil prospecting companies. Thus the rise of such armed group as. The Columbian, the Icelanders, Degbam, De-Well, the Italians, the Germans, the Akamarine, the Wayirigi-marine,the Niger-Delta Volunteer Force,[24] among others, whose leaders included Ateke Tom, Boyloff, Asari Dokubo and Tompolo.

The Various Responses to the Niger-Delta Peoples' Agitations:

One of the earliest responses to the post Willink Commission recommendations, was the creation of the Niger-Delta Development Board,in 1961. The board at creation was charged with the following duties; (1) to see to the survey of the Niger-Delta area in order to ascertain therequirement for the development of Niger-Delta (2), to prepare a development programme of the Niger-Delta and the cost implication.[25] Unfortunately the failure of the Board to live up to the requirement of its mandate due to the fraudulent practices of those saddled with the administrative and operational duties of the board, inevitably culminated in the conceptualization and subsequent birth of the Oil Mineral Producing Area Development Commission (OMPADEC), in 1992. The mandate areasof this post NDB commission, as outlined by its creator, General Badamosi Babangida, included; (a) the rehabilitation and development of all mineral producing areas,(b) to tackle the ecological problems that arose from oil exploration,(c) to determine the actual oil producing communities and to embark on comprehensive development of the areas.[26] Unfortunately, as a reoccurring decimal, the new commission could not survive the fraudulent test at the hands of Niger-Delta and Nigeria's corrupt politicians!

Rising from the ashes of the Oil Mineral Producing Area Development Commission, was the Niger-delta Development Commission (NDDC),in 2000. This commission was the creation of General Olusegun Obasanjo led military junta. The birth of the commission was not without oppositions from some of the indigenes of Niger-delta. The expressed opposing views were in reaction to the failure of the earlier commissions and boards to address the problems of the oil bearing communities. Amidst all opposing views, the newly created development commission gradually consolidated as a federal government agency responsible for the physical development of the Delta region.

Unlike the former development agencies, the Niger-Delta Development Commission appeared to have recorded more development strides in the region. These testaments were evident in the various development projectsknown to have been initiated and executed by the commission in the various states of the Niger-delta. Yet, arguments abound to prove that the development commission's

activities in the region were peripheral, scratchy and obviously lacked the comprehensive touch needed to fundamentally address the region's ecological and human capital development challenges.

Arising from this arguments, suggestions were later made requesting Federal Government's direct intervention in the economic development of Niger-Delta communities, as against the former practice of usingdevelopment agencies to tackle the challenges that faced the region.

One would therefore, in the light of the above, not insist that the birth of the Federal Ministry of Niger-delta Affairs, was the direct consequence of the Niger-delta Development Commission's failure to holistically address the development challenges that faced the region, nor was it a result of thecriticism that trailed the use of development agencies in the effort to solve the problems of the Niger-delta region.

Arguably, it may be suggestive, to submit that the salient motive for the establishment of the ministry was a response to the agitations by some Northern political elites, who were worried about the exclusive control and management of the NDDC'S affairs by Niger-Daltans. For the Northern agitators therefore, a new agency that would be managed and directed by the Federal Government and directly under the supervision of Northern political elites was imperative.

However, the correctness of these allegations/arguments seen not to have been proven beyond all doubts because since the inception of the commission, her development initiatives and achievements in terms of project accomplishment and development of many social infrastructures within and around the oil producing communities have been adjudged relatively impressive.

The Amnesty Offer; a Federal Government's Temporary Relief to the Restive Youths of Niger-Delta:

For various offences committed by Federal Government of Nigeria against the inhabitants of Niger-Delta region, which included; political exclusion- especially the presidential slot, which though, seemed to have been assuaged by the

emergence of Good luck Jonathan – an Ijo, as the president of the country, economic exploitation and deprivation, environmental degradation, politicization of the country's common wealth and destruction of aquatic life and farming- the major traditional economy of the people, the Federal Government therefore initiated the Amnesty programmed as a palliative offer to calm the pains inflicted upon the people of the region.

As a practical move to activate the Amnesty programmed, the Yara'dua led administration created the Niger-delta Technical Committee which was to be responsible for finding solutions to the Niger-delta agitations[27]with the committee ready and handy with its report on the mandate given to it by Federal Government, the challenge, as usual, became that of implementation, because Federal Government appeared not to have paid serious attention to the implementation of the committee's repent, hence the continued agitations in the region.

Multinational oil Companies Responses to the Problems of the Niger-Delta Region:

Besides the enumerated instances, as in the above, of Federal Government's interventions in the Niger-Delta region, there were verifiable cases of Oil Companies' and Non-governmental Organizations' interventions in the oil rich region with the aim to ameliorating the problems in the area. However, from available evidences and, in the face of obvious instances of government and multinational oil companies' interventions, theregrettable persistence of human capital underdevelopment, acute instances of unemployment and hazardous environmental decay and degradation. These catalog of unresolved problems in the region wereclear indications of the fact that agency interventions in the region have been negligent, scratchy, peripheral and ineffective in solving the problemsof the area, hence the paper's insistence that a holistic development master plan for the region has to be initiated and executed by the Federal Government of Nigeria.

Research findings:

The study was able to establish the fact that amidst the natural endowment in the Niger Delta, the inhabitants of the region, especially the rural dwellers were

subjected to the worst form of poverty and suffering.To worsen the already bad economic and environmental condition in the region, oil companies that operated in the region have failed in their efforts to commensurately implement the agreed corporate responsibilities to better the lots of the rural inhabitants. This obvious negligence on the part of the government- both state, federal and local governments have created a free playing ground for the expatriate officials to flagrantly abuse the individual and collective rights of the region's inhabitants by failing in their social duties to the people of the region.

It was discovered that the militancy, agitations and crises to which the region was enmeshed were the fall out of intense oil politicization and government inability to invest, or return to the region, their due share of the revenue that accrue to them as oil producing states. It was also observed that the history of oil in Nigeria and, indeed, Niger-Delta outdated Nigeria's independence. Oil economy thereafter became a replacement to the people's traditional economy and became, at independence, Nigeria's main source of revenue. More so, the presence of oil drastically changed the socio-economic and political landscape of Niger-Delta. Thus, government and multinational companies' involvement in the economic and ecological revival in the Niger-Delta through the use of development agencies, has not been able to profoundly and fundamentally address the development challenges in the region. Obviously however, contrary to some critics, there have been noticeable instances of Oil Companies' Governments' and Non-governmental Organization's interventions in the region which were intended to solve the environmental and infrastructure need of the people.

Conclusions:

The study of the economic and social history of oil in the Niger-Delta, has been the major focus of researchers, political economists and economic historians since the discovery of Oil in commercial quantity in Oluibiri, Bayelsa State; then River State. As the mainstay of Nigeria's economy, the Niger-delta waters and its environs that harbor the Oil mineral resources have been the attraction and envy of every politician nee Nigerian elites, the imperialistic nations of Europe and America. Consequently, as an areaof vested national and international interest, the region and its Oil resources have been the sources of combustible conflicts, crises and

unending agitations, thus this leading to yet to be fully addressed cases of poverty and ecological decays in the region, especially among the rural dwellers.

Its role as the economic and political game-changer, not only for the Niger-Delta region, but for the country at large, is evidently known and acknowledged both locally and internationally. Thus, the paper, in the light of the above, concluded that Niger-Delta, its Oil and the water bodies,were the sources of the troubles and blessings with Nigeria, and without which, Nigeria would have been an area of mild economic orientation devoid of much economic blessings and the consequent conflagration.

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