

Environmental Degradation and Its Impact on the Livelihood of the Peasants in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper examines environmental degradation and its impact on the livelihood of the peasants of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Constant emission of dangerous gases to the atmosphere and frequent oil spillages have contaminated and polluted the environment greatly. It has affected the peasants' main source of livelihood, because the crops, lands, swamps, streams and air are seriously polluted. This resulted to low agricultural productivity and it increases health hazard among the inhabitants as well as unemployment. The destruction of farmlands and crops increased rural-urban migration, thereby living the elderly and children to carry out agricultural activities. It was therefore recommended that the Federal Government of Nigeria should embark on rural development programs that will really improve the condition of the peasants.

***Keywords:* Environmental Degradation, Livelihood, Poverty, Oil Exploration.**

1. Introduction

The Niger Delta region is located at the South-South geo-political zone of Nigeria. The Niger Delta region of Nigeria covers about 50% of the total length of the Nigeria coastline and it is characterized by mangrove, swamps, islands, thick vegetation with evergreen foliage. The Niger delta region has experienced several environmental degradation emanating from oil exploration carried out by the multinational oil companies such as shell petroleum Development company, SPDC), Nigeria Agip Oil Company (NAOC), Chevron Nigeria Ltd, Texaco Nigeria Ltd, Elf Nigeria Ltd, Mobil Nigeria Ltd. The peasants residing in the rural areas of the Niger Delta region and the multinational oil companies depended on the available land and water for their survival since the late 1950's, 1960s and 1970's when oil was discovered in commercial quantities in the region.

Kanu (2018) posits that with the rise in global industrialization, man's activities in harnessing the Natural resources as well as other addition in human environment have led to increase in pollution of our natural water, soil and air. The ecosystem has been greatly altered and has resulted to several health challenges confronting the peasants in the rural areas of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, where oil are explored and dangerous gases are constantly emitted into the atmosphere. The multinational oil companies and the Federal Government of Nigeria are only interested in the huge revenue accruing from oil exploration while less emphasis is placed on environmental sustainability as well as the wellbeing of the peasants and the general habitat of the region. Deedam (2022) asserts that it is an obvious fact that the activities of the multinational oil companies exploring oil in the Niger Delta have devastating effects on the people, land, sea, crops, aquatic creatures and other animals.

In similar vein, Amanyie (2001) succinctly puts that the lands, streams and Creeks are totally and continually polluted, the atmosphere has been poisoned charged as it is with hydrocarbon Vapors, carbon-mono oxide and sooth emitted which has been flared 24 hours for 33 years. Oil spillage, erosion and leaking from oil pipelines, gas flaring, flood, erosion and salt water incursion are taking the ugly toll on the social and economic lives of the people of the region. The above explanation shows that environmental degradation has pose so much stress to the lives and livelihood of the peasants in the Niger Delta. The farmers and fishermen have been displaced and disempowered as a result of the incessant oil spillages and constant flaring of gases into the environment.

Conceptualization of Terms

The following concepts or terms are defined and explained to enhance clear understanding and to eradicate all forms of ambiguities.

Peasants

Peasants can be defined as a group of rural dwellers who engage in subsistence agriculture as their main source of livelihood. They relied on the traditional methods of farming which is enveloped by superstitious beliefs and produce food in small quantities.

Livelihood

This simply means the source of survival of the peasants. Livelihood in this context can also be seen as the main source of Revenue of the peasants in the rural areas of the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria.

Environmental Degradation

This simply means any addition or subtraction from the environment, land, air and water which constitutes stress to human survival and any other living organisms or plants. Environmental degradation can also be considered as the destruction of the ecosystem by man in his quest to eke out his living. It has to do with the deterioration and contamination of the environment which resulted to the depletion of Natural Resources. Environmental degradation takes place when natural habitats are destroyed paving ways for loss of biodiversity.

Pollution

This can be defined as the introduction of contaminants into the natural environment. Pollution can also be viewed as any undesirable substance or elements discharge or emitted into the environment by man that is harmful to both plants and animals.

2. Review of Related Literature

From time immemorial, the peasants actually engaged in subsistence agriculture to make earns meet. This depended solely on the products of their farms. In the pre-colonial era, there was high level of cooperation and collaboration among the peasants in the Niger Delta. This implies that they interdependent on each other as well as the environment for survival. Things began to change in the colonial and postcolonial era respectively as a result of increase in the environmental exploitation by man and Industrial activities.

Deedam (2022) posits that the oil exploration carried out by the multinational oil companies had increased environmental degradation which has devastating effects on the peasants who depend solely on the polluted land, Water and Air.

According to Oronto (1998) the Stockholm Conference on the Environment in 1972 and the Earth Summit in 1992. All Nations accepted Environmental Protection as an integral part of the development process, unfortunately rather than improve the environment, man through his continual interaction within the environment degrade it more and more.

Adetunji (2006) carried out his study on the Nigeria environments in Lagos and lamented that all the laws introduced by the federal government to control environmental pollution caused by oil exploration is never enforce despite the fact that Nigeria is a signatory to the several Summits organized in respect to environmental sustainability.

According to Okoko (1995), in the Western Division of the Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) a total of 1006 spillages were recorded between 1983 and 1996 in 46 oil fields (jetty) terminal involving 54,872.18 volumes spilled in addition to 171 cases of sabotage induced spillages involving 9,584.225 (BBLs) recorded in the same period. He further buttressed that in this regard, the companies do not act early enough to contain spills for instance at Akenfa and Ogboloma Communities. An oil spill which occurred between September and October 1995 was not cleaned up until December of the same year. These invariably increase the impacted area and created more damage to the environment. Consequently, the Marine lives in the affected areas (Nembe, Kula, Soku, Bonny, Oporoma, Bile, Kee) were destroyed. On the other hand, oil spills have also affected several other communities such as Bodo. Bomu, B. Dere, K. Dere, Afam. Apelegberie, Kpea etc.

In the same development, Naaneen (1995) states that evidence of environmental disasters is conspicuous throughout the area where vast areas of territorial and aquatic vegetation have been destroyed by oil spills, marine life for which the vegetation provides a life support systems has largely disappeared with vegetation.

The available land for production of food has greatly reduced since oil spillage has claimed several hectares of land from the peasants.

Researches conducted by experts and even the UNEP report (2011) has confirmed that many years of oil exploration and frequent oil spill have contaminated the Livelihood of the peasants residing in the various affected communities in the Niger Delta region. Hydrocarbon contamination was found in water taken from 28 wells at 10 communities adjacent to sites and Benzene was detected in all air samples at concentration ranging from 0.153 to 48.2 ug/nr in Ogoniland (UNEP Report 2011).

According to Poroma (2024), the UNEP report on Ogoniland established the empirical proof on the extent of the impact of oil exploration activities on the Niger Delta. Unfortunately the regulatory institutions saddled with the powers to checkmate and regulate cases of oil spills and environmental degradation seems to be handicapped as observed by UNEP in the 2011 report as it stated that the Nigeria government/agencies concerned lack qualified technical experts and resources.

It's Impact on the Environment

Oil exploration has impacted negatively on the people of Niger Delta, especially the rural dwellers who lived very close to the exploration sites. Several harmful substances and toxic organic compound have been emitted into the atmosphere, which altered the entire ecosystem. The emmission of dangerous gases into the atmosphere as a result of oil spillages and flaring of gases have multiple impacts on the inhabitants in the following ways, health, socio-economic, agriculture, life expectancy, security etc.

According to Akpan (2005) 7.7% of the 797 people interviewed on the socio-economic impact of oil exploration in Akwa-Ibom State identified farmland pollution as a major problem. The peasants are very reactive to these changes because of the unavailability of modern farming techniques to meet the challenges of a declining soil and marine resources. The drastic fall in output of the agricultural product, led to intensive exploitation of other fertile land. In similar vein, Essien (2005) avers that most farmers are concerned with

problem of displacement without settlement during oil spill. Most of the farmers have been forced out of their homes and villages because of oil spillages. Etekpe (2005) succinctly put that apart from loss of farms, oil spills have led to extensive deforestation with no adequate replanting practices; this in effect has shortened fallow periods, compounded land degradation and led to loss of soil fertility.

Oil Spills in the Niger Delta Regions from 2011-2022

YEAR	NO. OF SPILLS	MAJOR SPILLS	SPILLS WTH NO ESTIMATE	SPILLS WITH NO JIN
2011	1059	2	359	218
2012	1135	4	391	179
2013	1666	1	762	450
2014	1521	8	540	284
2015	920	4	268	158
2016	684	5	173	129
2017	599	6	178	73
2018	699	0	154	104
2019	723	5	192	70
2020	440	0	90	35
2021	382	2	122	33

Source: nosdra.oispillmonitor.ng

The above table shows that the Niger Delta region has experienced several oil spillages which impacted negatively on the environment and the economic activities of the region. Poroma (2024) posits that the resultant effect of these spills on the environment and sources of livelihoods of the people is devastating. In the Nigeria coastal environment, a large area of the mangrove ecosystem has been impacted and this exacted negative impact on the farmers and fishermen in the rural areas. Prior before now, the region was a source of both fuels for the indigenous people and habitat for animals. Unfortunately, the environment is now toxic and harmful to both plants and animals (man).

Thus, was hitherto a source of both fuels for the indigenous people and habitat for the areas rich ecosystem but is now unable to survive the oil toxicity of its habitat.

The Implication of Environmental Degradation on the Livelihood of the Peasants

Environmental degradation has adverse effects on the livelihood of the peasants in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria. Oil spillages and gas flaring close to human habitation are common features of the Niger Delta region. These oil spillage is sometimes caused by leakages of the oil pipelines and oil pipe vandalization by angry youths who engaged in illegal refining of oil. In addition to the above, there is high rate of deforestation that exposed the land to erosion which helps to reduce the fertility of the soil. Reduction of soil fertility affects crop growth and in the long run affects peasant farmers who relied on the natural soil for food production.

Sibiri and Udisi (2008), put it succinctly that prior to the discovery of oil in Bayelsa State, the people of Bayelsa State were predominantly artisanal fishermen. Their livelihood depended on surrounding aquatic ecosystem and the abundant water resources in their environment.

Any environmental change in this area must impact on their livelihood. The net effect of the above is drastic reduction in fishing activities and income of fishermen.

Stanley (1992) asserts that the peasants are very reactive to farm land pollution because of the unavailability of modern farming techniques to meet the challenges of declining soil

resources. In other words, the drastic fall in output of agricultural products leads to intensive exploration of other fertile land. The long run effect of this land degradation is out migration to other rural and urban areas.

Before this high rate of environmental degradation caused by oil spills and gas flaring, small plots of cassava farm was enough and capable of feeding the entire family for one year. But the reverse is the case when the soil continues to experience constant oil spills. The peasant farmers do not have the funds to buy bags of fertilizers that can help to replenish the soil. On the other hand, the crude oil that covered the crops prevented the crops from transpiration and the process of photosynthesis is also hindered. This resulted to stunted growth and low productivity because it can no longer take in carbon-dioxide and releases oxygen, which is very vital to the existence of man and plants.

To worsen the deplorable and humiliating condition of the peasants, the remediation or clean up exercise are not always done properly and timely. Hence, the peasants that depended on the streams and rivers ended up drinking contaminated water which resulted to different kinds of diseases that paved way for early death. In similar vein, emission of dangerous gases such as carbon-Monoxide, methane, soot etc., resulted to cardiovascular diseases such as asthma, coronary heart disease, cancer, lung disease etc. the peasants who lived in these region where oil spillages occurred frequently are mostly affected by the above diseases.

Greater proportions of the peasants are poor and illiterates, hence they find it difficult to go to specialist hospitals that are located in the cities far away from home for treatment.

The exposures to hazardous environment and eating of contaminated food as well as drinking of contaminated water have contributed to reduce longevity. Life expectancy among the men in the region is between 45 years and 55years, while that of the women is between 55years and 60years.

On the other hand, the disempowerment of the peasants caused by environmental degradation increased the rate of poverty and poor health among them. Uzorka and Uzorka (2019) posit that the entire social matric is heavily punctured by extreme poverty, deprivation, destruction and unemployment thereby creating psychological trauma amongst the people in the region. The argument is that the emergence of social ills in the Niger Delta region is generally perceived to be an expression of the traumatized condition the people have found themselves. The high level of frustration experienced by the peasants and their children forced them to engage in different kinds of illegal and unconstitutional means to earn their living. Some of the illegal means of raising income include; oil bunkering, pipeline vandalization, kidnapping and formation of militia groups.

Uzorka and Uzorka (2019) emphasized that it has been the general believe of most people in the Niger Delta region that with the discovery of crude oil in substantial commercial quantities, the entire region would witness a dramatic socio-economic transformation as recorded by similar oil rich enclave like the United States of America, Saudi Arabia and Communist China.

In similar vein, Okoko Nna and Ibaba, (2006) succinctly put that considering the enormous wealth generated by the oil companies, the communities had expected that their wretched state of living will be transformed, they thought that their communities will experience development and poverty will be eradicated. Paradoxically their state of wretchedness worsened as their local economics collapsed, poverty was exacerbated and unemployment jumped to the rooftops.

Poverty Statistics for the Niger Delta Region

State	Poverty incidence (%)	Core poor	Self assessed poverty	Very poor self-assessed	Gini
Akwa Ibom	35	27	66	17	0.50
Bayelsa	20	22	95	62	0.47
Cross River	42	33	77	22	0.50
Delta	45	23	81	25	0.47
Edo	33	16	79	35	0.46
Rivers	29	19	67	15	0.48
South-East	35	23	77	29	0.51
North-East	54	21.3	76	31.37	0.49

Source: Paul, F. et.al (2012)

The poverty statistics displayed above shows that the huge profits and success story recorded by the multinational oil companies have not transformed their local economy. Instead their oil exploration activities have disempowered the peasants, increased the rate of unemployment, frustration, criminality, massive rural-urban migration, formation of militia groups and conflict between the host communities and the multinational oil companies.

According to Poroma (2024), the Niger Delta exemplifies the Paradox of poor human and Social Development in an environment of riches. The region's abundant natural resources especially its oil, offer a potential foundation for development and prosperity. Instead the Niger Delta remains underdeveloped and afflicted by conflict and violence.

The violent conflicts that have characterized the region is rapidly increasing poverty, destruction of property, high death rate, unemployment and the main source of livelihood of the peasants have been destroyed because of the activities of oil exploration. Deedam (2022) posits that to worsen the situation, the land belonging to the peasants were forcefully acquired by the multinational oil companies supervised by the Federal Government of Nigeria. These peasants we're not consulted before their lands were forcefully acquired, infact the condition of the peasants deteriorated and poverty level increased tremendously as some of them presently have one or two plots of land respectively while others do not have any plot at all. According to Poroma (2024), decades of oil exploration exploitation and production activities in the Niger Delta have led to severe environmental degradation that has created complex problems in the region. One of these major problems is poverty which is stimulated by the policy of exclusionism and depleted environment perpetrated by the state over the decades. This has affected sources of livelihood and the living condition of the people.

According to Boele, Fabig and Wheeler (2001) in Poroma (2024) some households spend about 150-200 Naira to get daily clean water supply. This constitute a substantial strain particularly in a country where approximately 60.9 percent of the population lives in absolute poverty and above 100 million people live on less than 1\$ per day.

The findings above show that there is a significant relationship between environmental degradation and disempowerment of the peasants in the Niger Delta. The study also revealed that there is a correlation between environmental degradation and criminality in the Niger Delta Region, the reason is that so many youths engaged in kidnapping and oil bunkering because environmental degradation destroyed the sources of livelihood and therefore resulted to increase in unemployment. Based on this prevailing condition, some youths including peasants resolved to engage in criminal activities to make earns meet. It was also discovered that there is a significant relationship between environmental degradation and the health condition of the people. The constant flaring of dangerous gases into the atmosphere increase the level of diseases affecting the people, this resulted to low life expectancy and increase in

the number of people seeking for help in the region. This situation also increase high rate of drop out from school in the region. Following this development.

Environmental degradation has also increased rural-Urban migration in the region, so many people migrated from the rural communities into the cities in search of greener pasture since their main source of livelihood have been destroyed by the high rate of environmental degradation. The fishermen can no longer fish because the habitat of all aquatic creatures have been threatened and destroyed by oil spillages. On the other hand, the bulk of people left in the rural areas for subsistence agriculture has been reduced, this resulted to food crisis and high cost of food because agriculture is left in the hands of the elders and children who do not have the required energy and strength to farm. According UNEP Report (2011) the floating layers of oil which contains hydrocarbon has destroyed the fish, by destroying fish habitat in the mangroves make it unsuitable for fishes to live.

3. Conclusion

Environmental degradation has really threatened the livelihood of the peasants in the region. The region is characterized by environmental degradation caused by the activities of the oil multinational companies. There are frequent cases of oil spills which have negative effects on the aquatic creatures, crops planted on the farm, the soil, animals, trees, water and man. The main sources of livelihood of the peasants have been destroyed and their lands were falsely acquired by the oil companies under the supervision of the federal government of Nigeria. The federal government use coercive power of the state to protect the multinational oil companies whenever the owners of the land rose up to question the authenticity of the land, the federal government use the police and army to suppress them and some times, kill the innocent peasants. This situation has increased the poverty level of the peasants and no calculated or deliberate attempt had been made by the government to provide solutions to the above problems.

4. Recommendations

The following recommendations are proferred as solutions to the problems identified;

Oil theft and illegal refining of crude oil should be totally eradicated to avoid leakages and oil spills.

A thorough environmental impact assessment should be carried out where and whenever oil spills occur. This will enable them to carry out a proper remediation and compensation.

Oil spillage should not be allowed for weeks or months before it will be attended to. It should be addressed immediately.

The federal government should embark on rural development programme that will really improve the condition of the peasants as well as to check rural-urban migration.

Both international and local environmental laws should be adhered to so as to protect our environment.

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