PRESERVING THE NIGER DELTA FOR THE FUTURE

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INTRODUCTION

Preservation of the environment and its biodiversity has become a global concern. This is because, to drive the environment and its biodiversity to extinction is to correspondingly place the human race in a nasty, restless and distressful condition. It is, therefore, not out of place that sustainable development of the people was prominent in the Agenda 21 of the Rio summit of 1992. It also defined biodiversity as,

The variability among living organisms from all sources including inter alia, terrestrial, marine and other aquatic ecosystems and ecological complexes of which they are a part, this includes diversity within species, between species and ecosystem.

It becomes absolutely imperative for us to preserve and protect our environment, which is our natural heritage from predatory and unregulated desires. Unfortunately, in spite of the effects of community leaders, and Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) to save Niger Delta for the future, it has remained neglected, backward and desolate.

While the government is more interested in extracting mineral resources, less attention is paid to saving the ecosystem and the people from profound suffering and death. This is extremely important because as oil and gas are unceasingly extracted from the ground, there is a continuous disequilibrium of its biodiversity, including precious flora and fauna, and aquatic species.

This is not stupendous because oil exploration is a pollutant, with increasing seismic activities which makes life for living organisms worthless, restless and uncomfortable. Hutchful, observed that,

The oil industry is by its very nature a potentially massive polluter.

Accidents arise from human error and equipment failure. In addition, the oil industry generates waste and other by-products potentially harmful to the environment in its routine operations.

Sadly, the Niger Delta peoples have been passing through this excruciating condition since 1956 when oil was found in Oloibiri - Bayelsa State.
This paper will critically examine the pollution of the Niger Delta through the exploratory activities of the multinational companies (M.N.Cs), within the context of Nigeria’s political economy and how to preserve it for the benefit of future generation.

**The Niger Delta**

The Niger Delta is the economic mainstay of Nigeria. It bears the bulk of the country’s oil and gas reserve. Geographically, it stretches a few miles below the village of Aboh, at a point where the River Niger forks into the Nun and Forcados Rivers.

The area covers about 70,000sq km, and consists of a number of distinct ecological zones characteristic of the delta of a large river in tropical regions, coastal ridge barriers, mangroves, freshwater swamp forest and low land rainforest.

Apart from being world’s largest wetlands covering over 20,000 square km… Fubara noted that it is mostly a glut of swampy basin crisscrossed by a myriad of rivers and creeks.

According to Darah,

The Niger Delta has the ninth largest drainage area in the world. The Niger Delta wetlands and mangrove territory is the third largest in the world and most extensive in Africa. The Niger Delta accounts for 77.4% of Nigeria’s wetlands or 3.2% of the total land mass of the country.

The region is made up of people with distinct and distinguishable cultural background that has sustained them for many years. These people harmoniously interacted with their environment according to their level of technological sophistication. They not only formed an ethnographic melting point, but a political minority group in the political equation of the country. By the 1950’s, the region came to the political limelight because of the Sir Henry Willink Commission.
The Commission was set up to inquire into the fears of minorities in the unfolding political events. Although, the Commission did not recommend for state creation as demanded, but it noted that the Niger Delta was ‘neglected backward and poor’. It recommended for a Niger Delta Developmental Board and the entrenchment of fundamental human rights clause into the constitution to safeguard and guarantee the rights of the people.

According to the Southern Minorities Movement,

The Willink Commission was large hearted enough to recommend a system of special development programme for special areas of the Niger Delta … But for the past 35 years, the actual historical experience was one of neglect, marginalization and since the advent of oil industry … is tantamount to expropriation of their assets and natural resources, criminal disregard and the degradation of the environment. 8

From 1956 when oil was first found, till now, Niger Delta has become a beehive of industrial activities, mainly controlled by the major multinational companies such as Shell Petroleum Development Nig. Ltd., Chevron, Mobil, Totalfina Elf, Agip and others. These companies influence the commanding height of the economy through their oligopohistic activities. As Nwankwo observed ‘multinationals make no contribution to the development process; rather they operate simply to minimize their loses and maximize their profits.’

From 5,100 barrels per day, in 1958, … total production from Nigeria’s fields increased from 309m barrels in 1970 to 703,495m barrels in 1991. The peak of its production came in the 1980s when total output was 753.5 million barrels per annum (b.p.a), out of which 93% was exported oversea. 9

This brought unprecedented petrodollars into the country and unmanageable ecological problems. A new vista of life was opened in the country’s political economy based on
exploitation of oil related wealth, and a corresponding neglect of other areas of wealth accumulation.

Oil revenue alone was N196.4m in 1970 and by 1974 it had catapulted to N4,133.8m. Federal Government revenue rose from N758.1m in 1970 to N5,177.1m in 1979. While oil constituted 25.9% of the total revenue in 1970, the share by 1974 had risen to 80.8%. 10

Gradually, oil wealth became the sole determinant in the economic vein of the country. As Adebayo stated,

Oil revenue also substantially improved Nigeria’s balance of payments position by not only reducing the deficit but actually wiping out replacing deficit with surplus that reached N3,056.6m in 1974. The country’s reserve asset also showed marked improvement from N180m in 1970, the reserve expanded to N3,7b in 1975. 11

The emphasis on oil, led to the complete neglect of other sectors such as agriculture, especially cash crops. While .. agriculture accounted for 65.9 percent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the figure falling to 53.8 percent in 1966/67 and 41.8 percent in 1971/72. By 1974/75 the figure had declined still further, to 28 percent. 12

As an ‘internally colonized backwoods’ of Nigeria’s neo-colonized capitalist social formation., 13 its pervasive economic squeeze and blatant peripheralization became legendary. As every nooks and cranny of the area is forcefully foraged for oil and gas, the Nigerian state stands as a partial defender of the M.N.Cs because of its neo-colonial character.
The Nigerian state arose as a result of the contradictions of the colonial state. The colonial state was violent and interventionist because of its avowed mission to extract maximum profit by destroying pre-capitalist formation and anti-colonial forces.

Ake stated that, the colonial state was an all powerful and all conquering interventionist state.

… it was unequivocally the instrument of the colonizing power in its struggle against the colonized. 14
The colonial state, therefore, created the enabling condition for the emergence of the Nigerian post–colonial state. Both its custodians and the state paraphernalia were consciously chosen to expand and consolidate a capitalist mode of production and imperialist values. Therefore, it does not pretend to be pro-people or anti-imperialist. It is violent, dependant and obviously lacks relative autonomy. Since its interest is at variance with the people, legitimacy and respect are got through a commandist disposition, disregard of political norms and constant violation of the rights of the citizens.

Eteng stated that,
Legitimacy is thus constantly sought through political chicanery, fraud and the manipulation of charisma as well as clans and communal… interests. Legitimacy is also constantly sought NOT through the popular sovereign will of the masses, but through the Sovereign of the guns and the ability either to bribe and settle or to inflict pain and suffering. 15

With the pro-imperialist learning and its satellite character, it becomes possible to defend M.N.Cs in their unbridle destruction of the Niger Delta ecosystem. This defense automatically assures the custodians of state power enough economic wealth to consolidate and expend their material base. The consolidation of this relationship engenders a dwindling economic fortune for the greater majority of Niger Delta people. Owugah observed that,

the relationship between the Nigeria state and the oil companies is regarded by some seamless conspiratorial union against the people while some others believe that it is actually one which the Nigerian State has been privatized by the oil companies to serve their interest.16

It is this assurance of solid protection from the Nigerian State that makes it possible for M.N.Cs to pollute and desecrate the Niger Delta with stone-hearted impunity. Sam Egwu, averred that ‘at the core of the Nigerian crisis and the situation in the Niger Delta is Nigeria’s post–colonial state.’.17
As Nigeria suddenly experienced an oil boom in the 1970s, with a GNP estimated in 1974 at $22.4b in contrast to Algeria’s $11.7b and Libya’s $11.9b, it became the wealthiest state in Africa.18

Through legislations, the Nigerian state had a firm control of the oil and gas sector of the economy. These included, the Petroleum Act of 1969, which replaced the 1914 ordinance which vested to the State the ownership and control of mineral beneath and above the ground, Petroleum Production Decree 1975, Gas Re-injection Act 1981, Oil Pipeline Act 1990 and others. These laws gave the ruling class and their cronies an unimpeded access to petroleum wealth, to the neglect of the exploited classes.

Having consolidated their grip on oil,

the Nigerian power elites were in a frenzy of confusion, excitement and short-sightedness, suffused with petrodollars, they acquired extravagant tastes overnight. European and American capitalists at the behest of their governments encouraged Nigerians to buy all sorts of goods and services often on credit. 19

To control oil wealth means controlling the State or its apparatus. Therefore, competition for political power became forceful and fierce, including, coups d’etat. For instance, since 1966 there has been eleven coups with the April 22, 1990 being the bloodiest. 20

According to Turner,

……..Local intermediaries and foreign businessmen who are unable to gain access to the decision makers of the moment look forward to their replacement. State officials who cannot obtain positions which allow them to influence decision making similarly seek to influence those in power. In this conflict ridden contest the power of the guns and money plays an everyday role.21

Generally, as oil became the sole determinant of the country’s economic fate, corruption was institutionalized, waste, brigandage and endemic crisis came to define the character of the Nigerian State. Between 1974 – 1999, Nigeria earned at least $300b from oil, specifically from 1980 – 1983 it got about $77.4b and 1984 – 1993 it earned about $121.9b.22 Unfortunately, this money found their way into the private foreign account of the ruling class.
Nigeria, which was regarded as the ‘wealthiest State’ in Africa in 1974, drastically fell with a wobbling and asphyxiated economy, and a population that is living below the breadline level. The World Bank report stated that Nigeria’s GNP was at $260 in 1995... Nigerians live on less than one dollar per day, external debt about $35.51b, capacity utilization fell from 37.2% to 30.4%, average unemployment ratio was 50% in 1989 -1992, and 12% in 1994 – 1997 23. As the oil industry not only became an all comers affair, the revenue that accrued from it was mercilessly subjected to kleptocratic tendencies or frittered away on fripperies 24. Sadly, the ‘Giant of Africa’ became the most corrupt in Africa, with a heavy external debt burden.

**Effects of Oil Activities on the Niger Delta**

As the Nigerian State is completely aloof to the daily needs of the people because of its alliance with multinational imperialist interests, any attempt to address the dangerous effects of oil exploration on the environment and the people is either cosmetic or shallow. This is not strange because as Ihonvbere clearly stated:

> Once a state is militarized, it loses the capacity to mediate contradictions within and between communities, becomes intolerant of opposition, and becomes extra sensitive to critical minority and vulnerable communities.25

With uncontrollable search for oil and its mindless exploitation by M.N.Cs and their servicing allies, the environment and the people are subjected to untold degradation and hardship respectively. Sacred forests, houses and animals were wither killed or driven away because of the ever increasing noise arising from dynamite shooting and other seismic activities. In most cases, the land becomes desolate and wasted after drilling like the waste land of Oloibiri.

A times,

> There is perpetual high pitch noise emanating from all shell BP heavy vibrating machines, trucks and rig Heads, the deafening effect of the cumulative frequencies of all such noise can beside being alarming be very serious. 26
The gases these companies emit into the atmosphere not only diminish the protective effect of the ozone layer in the atmosphere, but the constant gas flares into the atmosphere without the necessary regulation, undoubtedly place the people in a never-ending discomfort, reduction of agricultural yield and acidic rain. The effect of this can be harmful to the skin, since the ozone layer serves as a shield to cover the earth from ultraviolet radiation from the sun. 27

Obviously, the Nigerian State is not interested in the protection of the Niger Delta nor its people, but concerned with collection of rents and royalties from the M.N.Cs. Some of its legislations like the Federal Environmental Protection Agency Act of 1988 (FEPA), National Environmental Protection (Management Produce and Environment Impact Assessment) Regulation Decree 86, 1992, Gas Re-injection Act of 1981 and National Environment Pollution Regulation 1991, all consciously reflect a lip service commitment and non-seriousness of the Nigerian state in protecting the people’s heritage from destruction. These laws are neither enforced when violated by M.N.Cs and their allies nor taken seriously by the ruling class.

This is why in spite of these enactments which appear progressive on paper, Nigeria continues to be the number one leader in gas flaring. The country releases over 35 million tons of carbon dioxide per year and about 12 million tons of methane per year into the atmosphere. About 1.75 billion standard cubic feet of gas is being flared daily. 28 This is scandalously outrageous and dangerous to the health of the people and other living organisms. If this rate of gas flare continues unabated, it becomes a mirage to expect a stop of gas flaring in 2008 as was agreed by the government and M.N.Cs.

According to a World Bank Report, Nigeria flares 76 per cent of natural gas in contrast to Libya’s 21.0 percent, Saudi Arabic’s 20 percent, Algeria’s 4.0 percent, USA 0.6 percent and the Netherlands zero percent. 29

Apart from the above, the Niger Delta has been subjected to devastating oil spill since 1980, with thousands of barrels of oil destroying farmland, crops and aquatic organisms. Anikpo reported that there was the Texaco Funiwa – 5 oil blowout. The extensive
damage to the people’s sources of livelihood caused by the spillage was not only a significant impediment to development, but also a source of serious conflict between the inhabitants of the area and Texaco Oil company. Since 1980 till now, oil spillage with its permanent ecological discomfort has become a perennial source of concern for the Niger Delta as the table 1 shows:

**OIL SPILL FROM 1980 – 1997**

**TABLE 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>NO.</th>
<th>NO.OF.BARRELS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>22,500.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>258</td>
<td>108,367.01</td>
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<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>378</td>
<td>51,187.90</td>
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<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>453</td>
<td>8,105.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>495</td>
<td>35,123.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>417</td>
<td>63,677.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>39,903.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>10,000.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2,209</td>
<td>32,884.71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources; South – South Express, Thursday August 17, 2000

From the above table, we can see that from 1980 – 1997, the Niger Delta has recorded 2,209 oil spills with about 32,884.77 barrels of oil lost on the environment. This is important considering the fact that the lackadaisical attitude of the oil company officials and agents of the government makes it difficult to properly record, clean and recover these spills from the environment. The aftermath is that the people groan in their gnawing environmental pain, in their hopeless and helpless condition. According to the Chairman of the Niger Delta Environmental Survey, Mr Gamelier Onosode,
For most part, the rate of unemployment in the Niger Delta is higher in most other parts of the country. Given socio-economic infrastructure, most household lack food, security which in terms of food hazards, the major problems are posed by photogenic, cyanide toxicity, mycotoxins and hydro carbon contamination. 31

In the same vein Eteng states that,

… the negative impact of petroleum development in the Delta region has given rise to intense land degradation, rapid agricultural decline, Delta forest loss of severe biodiversity and fisheries depletion, rampant and destructive oil spillages, continuous gas flaring are toxic water contamination. 32

The cumulative effect of the sufferings of the people and the mindless devastation of their region in search of oil wealth has resulted to crisis of complex dimensions. The crises which were mild in the 1980s, assumed a different dimension in the 1990s. These included communities like Choba, Etche, Ogoni, Odi and Warri. In all these communities where crisis erupted, the government was on the side of the M.N.Cs, killing, burning villages raping women and arresting opinion leaders as in Choba, Etche (Umuechem and Odi. In other to protect oil derived benefits and other privileges, the Nigerian State has militarized the whole environment and assumed the status of an ‘unconscionable – usurper landlord’. Its political deceit and deprivation strategy has consistently disempowered the people. As a result, militant youth militia, and ethnic class consciousness have arisen as centrifugal primordial forces which reduce the Niger delta to a jungle with the enduring slogan of survival of the fittest.

Anikpo noted that from 1995 – 1999 about 134 community conflicts occurred. These were in form of demonstrations, road blocks, hostage taking, closure of flow station etc.

The deepening conflicts between oil companies and their host communities have become an albatross bird on the neck of the Nigerian State. Apart from internationalizing their cause as in the Ogoni example, they have presented petitions embodying their demands and woes as a result of non provision of basic amenities by M.N.Cs in
spite of their years of operation. Some of these petitions included, the Ikwerre Rescue Charter, Ogoni Bill of Rights, Kaima Declaration and others. It was the increasing momentum and intensity of the crisis that made the government to react.

**GOVERNMENT REACTION**

It was in the 1990s that government reacted to the increasing complaints of the Niger Delta People. This was inform of the Oil Mineral Producing Area Commission headed by Chief A. K. Horsfall (OMPADEC). OMPADEC was given 3% of the national revenue to develop the people of the oil bearing Communities. Unfortunately, the Commission fell to the virus of corruption and starved of the officially-allocated fund to work with. Out of the ₦85,9,56b allocated to it between 1992-1996, only ₦13,154,296b was paid, leaving a short full of ₦72,335,2734b.

The establishment of OMPADEC was followed by the increase of the derivation principle from 3% to 13%.

It is important to state that the Niger Delta people have persistently insisted that the principle of derivation should be the yard stick in the allocation of the national wealth. Although, derivation principle was in vogue during the colonial period, it was gradually de-emphasized through legal enactments like. Decrees 9, 1971, 6, 1975 and others.

The poor performance of OMPADEC led to the Niger Delta Development Commission. NDDC’s sources of fund include the government 15%, and 3% from the declared profit of MNCs. It is doubtful if the Commission can effectively accomplish its task considering its debt of ₦80b, 35, the unwillingness of the interested parties to make their contributions, and subjected to the whims of the ruling party, for patronage and guarantee the loyalty of its members. All these official actions including the recent signing into law of the Offshore /Onshore Dichotomy Act 2003 are land able, but they do not objectively address the poverty level of the Niger Delta people, and the ecological extinction of the region. As Fubara alerted, Niger Delta is subsiding rapidly as a result of oil and gas extraction by between 7cm to 9cm within the past ten years.
Information available is that Lake Mafacaibo in Venezuela in the same position of Niger Delta subsided by 500cm in 50 years.
The fear is that about 40 km wide strip of the Niger Delta and her people would be submerged and rendered extinct within the next 20 years.

The above quote foretells a bleak future for the Niger Delta people which calls for an urgent and comprehensive action to preserve the place for the future. With Nigeria’s proven reserve of 22.5billion barrels in 1999, representing 2.1% of global oil reserve, and producing at 2.2million barrels per day (mbd), and estimated gas proven reserve of 159 TCF in 1998, out of this 85 TCF for Associated Gas and 74 TCF for non Associated Gas, it is not likely that the Nigerian State would take aggressive remedial policy to protect and preserve the Niger Delta environment. This means that the future of the Niger Delta is uncertain and on tenterhooks.

**CONCLUSION**

The Niger Delta has become Nigeria’s wealth producing region because of its high concentration of oil and gas. Unfortunately, this wealth has become a source of wanton ecological degradation and doom for the people. They are not only affected by constant oil spills arising from faulty and old equipment, but are victims of any ecological disequilibrium and negligence from MNCs staff. This was how a fire from the Nigerian National Petroleum Company (NNPC) burnt more than one thousand people from Jesse community (Warri) in 1998. According to a Punch newspaper report, more than 5,000 pupils from 52 communities which make up Jesse whose parents died in October Jesse disaster has been forced out of school, 400 widows and 100 aged persons are suffering.

It has become absolutely necessary that something urgent has to be done to save the environment from ruin. But this may be impossible considering the dependant and tenuous relationship of the Nigerian state vis-à-vis production. This is why it depends on collection of rents and royalties from the M.N.Cs. Sadly, these wealth are not used to satisfy the basic needs of the people, but for selfish appropriation by the bourgeois class.
and their cronies. While the country is producing more wealth, the bourgeois class and their imperialist allies are getting richer, the exploited classes are economically squeezed and made to live a poverty stricken life.

It is therefore, extremely important for the oil companies, to assume a corporate responsibility for the long years of despoliation and destruction of the biodiversity of the Niger Delta. This can be in form of taking appropriate measures that will reduce to the minimum the release of carbon dioxide, burning of coal, and gas flaring which intensify the green house effects and increase the temperature of the environment.

The Nigerian State must be environment friendly. It should enforce to the letter those laws that protect our environment from the greed and exploratory activities of M.N.Cs. This is by objectively addressing the principle of environmental impact assessment at all times, the basic problems of their host communities, especially employment and social amenities.

It should constantly create a forum for dialogue between the M.N.Cs and the communities. This would diffuse tension and give all the concerned parties a sense of belonging and responsibility.

It is also germane to state that the militarization of the Niger Delta has made it possible for the place to be constantly in turmoil and the people living in fear. This is because the government has failed to ensure the security and protection of the people. It is, therefore, necessary for the Nigerian state to demonstrate its neutrality in the militarized state of the Niger Delta by disarming all the ethnic militia who parade their weapons of mass destruction with impunity. Such an environment cannot be said to be peaceful and existing for the interest of the people.

Unfortunately, it is unlikely that the Nigerian state as it is presently constituted can undertake such a radical transformation. This is obvious because of its imperialist leaning and capitalist disposition.
This means that we have to look beyond the State if the task of Saving Human Race and Earthly Kingdom is to be achieved. Whatever style and dimension it will take, will depend on the maturity of the crises and the subjective conditions.
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