

---

## THE CURSE OF OIL; THE UNSPOKEN ECOLOGICAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEVASTATION IN THE NIGER DELTA REGION OF SOUTHERN NIGERIA

Ferdinand Daminabo and Owajiony Frank

Department of Architecture, Rivers State  
University of Science and Technology Npkolu, Port Harcourt, Nigeria  
E-mail: [ferdydaminabo@yahoo.com](mailto:ferdydaminabo@yahoo.com)

---

**Abstract:** In his 2006 State of Union address, the former US President, Gorge W. Bush described America's severe case of oil addiction. 50 miles off the coast of Louisiana, and four years later, a massive explosion occurs on the 20th of April 2010 on Transocean Deepwater Horizon rig spilling 210,000 gallons of crude every 24 hours into the sea sparking off a massive clean up with an estimated \$20 billion escrow fund by shell to tackle the menace; the worst environmental disaster in US history. However, in the Niger Delta region an ecological and environmental nightmare is occurring with little or no intervention by Shell or government with total devastation to ecology and the environment with communities sacked and economic means destroyed. The Department of Petroleum Resources estimated 1.89 million barrels of petroleum were spilled into the Niger Delta between 1976 and 1996 out of a total of 2.4 million barrels spilled in 4,835 incidents (approximately 220 thousand cubic metres). A UNDP report states that there have been a total of 6,817 oil spills between 1976 and 2001, which account for a loss of three million barrels of oil, of which more than 70% was not recovered 69% of these spills occurred off-shore, a quarter was in swamps and 6% spilled on land. Some spills are caused by sabotage, however most are due to poor maintenance by oil companies such as Shell in a vast wetland of about 20,000 Km<sup>2</sup> comprising of 40 ethnic groups. This paper seeks to bring to a sharp focus the plight of devastated centres far from the Gulf of Mexico to global attention and the need to promote the use of alternative and renewable sources of energy instead of concentration in the use of fossils. While the developed countries with their relatively small population have produced most of the carbon dioxide which produces global climate change, they also have the benefits from the production of carbon dioxide and the resources to protect themselves from the consequences of the resulting climate change. The developing countries, on the other hand, with their large and rapidly growing populations, have less responsibility for causing global climate change, have received fewer benefits from the production of carbon dioxide, and have fewer resources to protect themselves from the consequences of the resulting climate change, a scenario that plays out in oil exploration and exploitation as in the Niger Delta and like Mexico requires global attention.

**Keyword:** Oil, Environment, Niger Delta, Nigeria

### INTRODUCTION

A paltry area of about 29,900 square kilometres and boasting of the largest wetland in Africa as well as occupying the third largest wetland in the world, the Niger Delta situated between longitude 5° E to 8°E latitudes 4°N to 6°N in the Gulf of Guinea is currently embroiled in a fist cuff with Shell Nigeria and other oil giants in Nigeria including stakeholders in oil exploration and exploitation in Nigeria. Militancy by restive youths who have adopted kidnapping and damage to oil facilities and oil bunkering as an offensive tool to wrestle oil from heinous exploitation by those who have the advantage has become an effective way of sending a strong message and an emphatic statement of the ongoing plunder in the Niger Delta in the face of government ineptitude. The Niger Delta ecosystem, containing one of the highest

**Ferdinand D. and Owajiony F.**

concentrations of biodiversity on the planet, in addition to supporting the abundant flora and fauna, arable terrain that can sustain a wide variety of crops and economic trees and having more species of freshwater fish than any ecosystem in West Africa (Wikipedia 2007) is under severe threat and its people facing the possibility of extinction if current trends continue unabated. Over 40,000 barrels of crude oil spilled in one day, an admission by Shell Nigeria on 21 of December 2011, described as one of the worst oil spillage in a decade in the Niger Delta area <sup>[1]</sup>. A United Nations (UN), report in 2011 on five decades of relentless oil spills indicates an extensive ecological damage to the Niger Delta of which the environmental and social consequences are now irreversible. <sup>[2]</sup> These hover in the face of suffering and abject poverty from administrative neglect, crumbling social infrastructure and services, high unemployment, social deprivation, filth and squalor and endemic conflict” due to militancy. This paper therefore seeks to take a cursory look at the criminal neglect of the Niger Delta region despite the fact that it produces about 98 percent of Petroleum exports and derivatives making up over 80 percent of Nigerian government’s annual revenue and 70 percent of budgetary expenditure. Crude oil resource gives the Nigeria government about US\$ 20 million a day. <sup>[3]</sup> The paper will affirm that the region under consideration deserve to be specifically earmarked for complete rehabilitation and direct injection of emergency funds despite ongoing efforts which has remained grossly inadequate and or to declare a state of emergency because of the aforementioned predicaments of the region and its population presently being driven to the precipice and near annihilation.

## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

The broader Niger Delta Region consists of nine states (Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo and Rivers) and 185 local governments. <sup>[4]</sup> The estimated regional population is nearly 30 million people. Difficult topography encourages people to gather in small communities. Of the estimated 13,329 settlements in the Niger Delta, approximately 94 percent have populations of less than 5000 people. <sup>[5]</sup>



**Figure 1: Niger Delta Area**

Oil was first discovered in commercial quantities in the Ijaw community of Oloibiri in 1956 in the Ogbia Local Government Area of Bayelsa State. Nigeria is the worlds 13th largest oil producer, and the 6th largest in OPEC. In the domestic sector, from 1970 to 1999, oil generated almost \$231 billion for the Nigerian economy, constituting between 21 and 48 percent of GDP. Nigeria has an estimated oil reserve of 32 billion barrels - sufficient for 37 years at the current rate of production.<sup>[6]</sup> This rise in oil wealth has not translated into significant increases in living standards in Nigeria but graphically portrays the rise in poverty and inequality coinciding with the discovery and export of oil in Nigeria. The plunder of the Niger Delta is graphically captured by one of its illustrious and outspoken son, Mr. Ledum Mitee, MOSOP Acting President (December 1998) who said; "When I travel outside Nigeria people often ask me how far away Ogoni is. I tell them it is as far as the nearest Shell service station. In a century of oil exploration, the developed North of the planet has founded its way of life on petroleum, without thinking about the impact of this trade on societies in oil-producing, underdeveloped regions of the South. Indigenous communities of the Niger Delta have been the worst affected. When Shell came to Ogoni in 1958, they promised us peace and prosperity. In return for \$30 billion worth of oil, successive Nigerian governments and Shell have delivered poverty and pollution. When we stood up to demand our human rights to a clean environment and to choose the use of our land and its resources, they murdered us in our thousands. The petrol in the tank of your car, they have paid for, with our blood" (Mitee, 1998).<sup>[7]</sup> Mr Mitee is from the Rivers State and thus are the untold stories of devastation and economic marginalisation of the remaining eight states of the Niger Delta that host 150 oil fields and 1,481 according to the Nigerian Ministry of Petroleum Resources, (Imaah, 2014).<sup>[8]</sup>

## **VIOLATIONS OF INTERNATIONAL LAWS AND BEST PRACTICE**

The dispatch with which the a massive explosion that occurred 50 miles off the coast of Louisiana on the 20th of April 2010 on Transocean Deepwater Horizon rig spilling 210,000 gallons of crude every 24 hours into the sea that sparked off a massive cleanup was quite significant in the sense that an estimated \$20 billion escrow fund was earmarked by shell to tackle the menace; the worst environmental disaster in US history. This was not only an epic operations, it was exceptionally legendary. There appears to be a foreclosure to the clean up exercise and victims have been properly and adequately compensated but not so, the Niger Delta. The culprits for this criminal neglect have their tinge and positions on the malaise as posited by (Iyayi, 2006)<sup>[9]</sup> enunciating according to the following;

- (i) The Nigerian state
- (ii) The Trans-national Oil Companies (TOC)
- (iii) The leading governments of the western world
- (iv) The host communities in the Niger-Delta

These are explained hereunder:

- (i) According to him, the Nigerian state has consistently held the view that the problem in the Niger-Delta is the criminal activities of the people in the region. For example, consider the letter from President Olusegun Obasanjo to the Governor of Bayelsa State on 20th November, 1999 just before the military operation by the Nigerian state which wiped out Odi village and its inhabitants in 1999. In that letter, President Obasanjo as the President and Commander-In-Chief of the Armed Forces of the Nigerian state was unable to make a distinction between those responsible for the actual abduction of the state security operatives in the area and those with whom the governor of the state was holding negotiations. The president saw everybody in the

**Ferdinand D. and Owajiony F.**

state as criminal including members of Bayelsa state government and the governor of the state. This presupposes that the Nigerian State epitomized by the president and commander-in-chief of the armed forces saw the people of Niger-Delta as criminals without attempting to understand their predicaments.

- (ii) On the other hand, the position of the transnational oil companies is that the problem in the Niger-Delta is the attitude of the local communities to oil exploitation in their areas. For example, in a recent interview with Friends of the Earth International in South Africa, which was captured on celluloid, the managing director of Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) Nigeria, explained that, but for the opposition of the Ogoni people, SPDC would have taken steps to redress the ecological damage in several parts of Ogoni land. Good that the managing director appreciated the fact that SPDC has done tremendous damage to the eco-system of Ogoni land. Nonetheless, one may ask why it took the company many years to recognize and appreciate this.
- (iii) The governments of leading western countries tend to see the problem in much the same way that the Nigerian state and the oil companies view the problem in the Niger-Delta. While they recognize that issues of development may be involved, they are more inclined to see it in security terms. This explains, for example, the offer by the United States of America to train Nigerian troops for military operations in the swamps of the Niger-Delta.
- (iv) On their part, the local communities hold that it is the collusion between the oil companies and the Nigerian state not just to deprive them of their resources, but to set them against each other and exploit the resources in ways that *Journal of Peace, Conflict and Development - Issue 16, November 2010*, p115 had asserted.

However, there appears to be a gross dislocation taking into consideration the application of several interrelated local, national and international laws and regulations that provide aperture for succor and redress for victims of oil spillage and environmental damage with the Niger Delta in sharp focus. The dislocation relegates the relevant principles of international environmental law through which victims of oil spillage can seek compensation and the absence of a comprehensive convention on safety standards for oil platforms.

#### **ENVIRONMENTAL DEVASTATION AND IMPUNITY**

Oil spillage brings about devastating and sometimes irreversible damage to wetland ecology, wildlife, and biodiversity. Drinking water has been contaminated, soil composition have been altered irreversibly most of which have been accorded legal protections in national and international law.[10] Oil spills put the state in violation of various treaty obligations under international law. The duty of a state to perform its obligation under a treaty is clearly provided for in Article 26 of the Vienna Convention on Law of Treaties.<sup>[11]</sup> Estimates suggest that 5-10% of Nigerian mangrove ecosystems have been wiped out by oil, which acidifies the soils, thus halting cellular respiration and starving plant roots of oxygen. The overall adverse effects of oil exploration in the Niger Delta in Nigeria have been summarized as follows;

The slow poisoning of the waters of this country and the destruction of vegetation and agricultural land by oil spills which occur during petroleum operations.



Farming destroy



Drinking water



Dead Fishes



Burning hell

Figure 2: Environmental Disaster in Pictures

However, since the inception of the oil industry in Nigeria more than twenty five years ago, there has been no concerted and effective effort on the part of the government, let alone the oil operators, to control environmental problems associated with the industry. A quote from a local characterizes the conundrum; “We don't have pipe borne water here, our only source of drinking water is the surrounding stream and creeks, but we can no longer drink the water because it has been polluted. Everywhere you go, you see dead fishes Figure2 and layers of crude oil”.<sup>[12, 13]</sup>

## SUSTAINABILITY AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Sustainability emphasises the development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.<sup>[14]</sup> Sustainable development envisions a symbiotic balance between two pursuits that are often portrayed as mutually exclusive; maintenance of a sound environment, economic and social development.<sup>[15]</sup>

<sup>[16]</sup> This advocates for the adoption of developmental policies that protect the environment from degradation. It also emphasizes a comprehensive and integrated approach to economic and social development processes through judicious and thoughtful use of the environment such that it will be maintained for coming generations.<sup>[17, 18]</sup>



**The Curse of Oil; The Unspoken Ecological and Environmental Devastation in the Niger Delta Region of Southern Nigeria**

*Ferdinand D. and Owajiony F.*



**Graphic photo of level of devastation**



**The Inferno**



**Armed Response by bitter youths**

**Figure 3: The Cycle of Doom and Gloom in Niger Delta**



**Sweet crude**

What is evident is that the devastation has transmogrified this present generation into dissenters and militants because their present needs are not met, not to mention the needs of future generations. The level of deprivation and depreciation of the quality of life in this run down environment is not difficult to discern with the least effort; a devastation that is in the continuum. This portends not only danger to the entire ecosystem of the Niger Delta but to its humanity and economic life; a detour to annihilation. Infrastructure, plant and animal life are all at risk and mirroring the Gulf of Mexico oil spill, this remedial is on its head, a direct opposite in response and rehabilitation. Oil exploitation and exploration continues irrespective of international norms say at the North Sea or Gulf of Mexico platforms. This a war of attrition as the international regulators turns the other way; a situation that cannot be tolerated from nations where the oil giants emanate from. This calls for a rethink by all stakeholders and operators in this region and the government to meet treaty obligations under international law instead of allowing the suspicion by locals that their predicament is collusion between the oil companies and the Nigerian state to deprive them of their resources.

**DISCUSSION**

A catalogue of woes from oil spillages and gas flaring that has not only ravaged the environment but caused severe atmospheric pollution including soil and ground water contamination and acid rain is the norm in the Niger Delta region. The constant gas flares and the heat emanating from and around the flare pits and issues of water salinity has increased health hazards across the contaminated landscape of the region upsetting life cycles of plants and animals including

enormous emissions of greenhouse gases. However, oil operations continue in the same old fashion with excruciating impact on the environment. The question now is; will there be a rethink on the part of the government and Oil giants to adopt international best practice to assuage the plight of the people of the Niger Delta or insist on business as usual? Common sense has shown that the crises in the Niger delta might implode into a fuel scale war going by the total and criminal neglect of the region since oil was first discovered in the region in 1956. Militants and different armed groups in region who had in the past cut oil production and output thus spiking prices of oil globally are threatening once again as the effect of Late President Yaradua's intervention program had failed to address key issues of the militancy due to corruption and high jack of the process by profiteers and rogue politicians in collusion with the oil companies as it is widely believed by locals in the region. The Boko Haram insurgency in the North East of Nigeria has also added the fear and suspicion that there is a grand ploy by North not only to dominate the polity but that the Niger Delta continues to be deprived of its resources especially since resource control at the ongoing National Conference in Abuja was met with resistance from the North. The 2015 general is just months away and the focus and searchlight is not beaming on the Niger Delta question. President Goodluck Jonathan is from the Niger Delta and his four years in office is generally believed not have put smiles on the faces of his kinsmen or seriously addressed the injustice and underdevelopment of the region. Judging by the severe insecurity challenges faced by Nigeria especially the Chibok Girls abduction and unrest in the North East because of the activities of the Boko Haram, the Niger Delta issues remains a teething problem waiting to implode if urgent steps are not taken. This might have consequences that will reverberate across Africa and by implication, globally and requires a concerted and pragmatic solution.

## CONCLUSION

The intractable problems of the Niger Delta can with the cooperation of the Nigerian State and the oil giant being the Multinational companies and other stakeholders operating in the region device effective policy regime to address the underdevelopment of the region including a strategy of a massive clean up with a cue from the Gulf of Mexico. This will include a clean up strategy, compensation and empowerment of different impoverished communities in this region marginalised for decades with systematic and verifiable destruction of the environment and the ecosystem and by implication their means of livelihood. This might look like a distant problem but could spark massive migration issues as people try to survive. This has been seen in Lampedusa, Italy where people are fleeing conflict or deprivation from North Africa and recently the massive immigration from Mexico which is now a massive problem to the United States Obama administration. Despite this risk, there could be a total shutdown in the worlds 6<sup>th</sup> largest most important exporter of crude oil with global consequences. The worst case scenario could be the conflict in the Niger Delta region snowballing out of control as the Isis Conflict in Iraq, but this time with a population of 160 million Nigerians on the move, a nightmare that can better be imagined. The resolution of the Niger Delta must quickly be addressed by both government and the multi-national companies operating in the region based on International norms and again dialoguing with the oil bearing states and communities with the aim of creating an enabling and sustainable environment for all.

## REFERENCES

1. J. Vidal, 'Nigeria on Alert as Shell Announces Worst Oil Spill in a Decade', <http://www.guardian.co.uk/Environment>, 2011(Accessed 5 July, 2014).
2. UNEP, 'Environmental Assessment of Ogoni Land' <http://www.unep.org/nigeria>, (accessed 07 July, 2014).

Ferdinand D. and Owajionyi F.

3. Onduku, A., "Environmental Conflicts: The Case of the Niger Delta" A Presentation at the One World Fortnight Programme Organized by the Department of Peace Studies, University of Bradford, United Kingdom, 2001.
4. UNDP *Niger Delta Human Development Report* (2006),pp.44.
5. UNDP *Niger Delta Human Development Report* (2006),pp.15.
6. Heymans, C. and Pycroft, C., "Drivers of Change in Nigeria: Towards Restructuring the Political Economy", DFID Nigeria, 2005.
7. Mitee, Ledum,. Overview: Ogoni, Shell & the Nigerian State, PH, Nigeria,1998
8. Imaah N.O., Architecture, Infrastructure and Oil Exploration in the Niger Delta of Nigeria: The Boom, the Blunder and the Brunt. *The Journal of Ecology. Photon*, 2014. pp108, 266-282.
9. Iyayi, F., "Creating an Enabling Environment for Development in the Niger Delta Warri, (2006), pp.1.
10. Convention on Biological Diversity, May 1992.
11. Article 26 of the Vienna Convention on Law of Treaties; "The *pactasuntservanda principle*,1972.
12. Greenpeace International, 'Shell Shocked: The Environmental and Social Costs of Living with Shell in Nigeria (1994)<http://archive.greenpeace.org>
13. H Dappa-Biriye, R Briggs, B Idoniboye-Obu and M Fubara, 'The Endangered Environment of the Niger Delta: Constraints and Strategies' (An NGO Memorandum for the World Conference of Indigenous Peoples on Environment and Development and the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro), 1992, pp. 52.
14. H Christian Bugge & C Voigt, (eds.), *Sustainable Development in International and National Law* (Europa Law Publishing, 2008. pp 88.
15. Marie-Claire Cordonier Segger and Ashfaq Khalfan, *Sustainable Development Law* (Oxford University Press 2004).p1
16. Nico Schrijver, *The Evolution of Sustainable Development Law: Inception, Meaning and Status* (Martinus Nijhoff Publishers 2008) p 1.
17. R. Mushkat, 'Environmental Sustainability: A Perspective from the Asia-Pacific Region,' (1993)
18. S. T. Kuokkanen, *International Law and the Environment* (Kluwer Law International 2002), pp.21.

---

**Reference** to this paper should be made as follows: Ferdinand D. and Owajionyi F. (2015), The Curse of Oil; The Unspoken Ecological and Environmental Devastation in the Niger Delta Region of Southern Nigeria. *J. of Sciences and Multidisciplinary Research*, Vol. 7, No. 1, Pp. 44 - 51.

---