

ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION, CONFLICT AND CRIMINALITY IN THE NIGER DELTA: A CONCEPTUAL AND EMPIRICAL DISCOURSE

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Abstract

The problem of environmental degradation in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria has continually remained a topical issue at the local, regional and global levels. However, new dimensions to the problem continue to emerge that needs empirical, theoretical, conceptual and even policy discussions in order to address them effectively. This paper examines the old issue of environmental degradation but with concern on providing conceptual and empirical discourse as it relates to conflict and criminality in the Niger Delta region. In the light of this, the paper's central argument is that environmental degradation necessitated by the activities of oil multinational corporations in the Niger Delta, created the ungodly scenario for social conflicts and criminality. The problems associated with the environment in the region has raised a large army of youths who are largely divided into those who rightly fight for resource and environmental justice and those who hide under the just struggle to perpetrate all forms of criminal acts such as hostage taking and kidnapping in the region. In the light of the role that environmental degradation plays in conflict and criminality, the paper suggest the need for genuine environmental policy creation and implementation by the Nigerian State as a way forward.

The environment is one of the liveliest and topical issues of our day. The environment is in crisis globally and the situation is such a pathetic one due to the degree of devastation done to it by human activities and the complexity of the crisis seems rather intractable. Even though environmental problems essentially develop in a local framework, they are also frequently connected at regional, national and even international levels (Murphy, 2009:4).

Environmental problems such as climate change, rainforest loss, collapsing fisheries and water scarcity represent some of the most serious challenges facing society and it seems likely that many will get worse in the future. The seriousness of the situation is illustrated by the growing number of reports highlighting environmental degradation as threats to the national security of the countries (Council on Foreign Relations, 2007:35). Such reports are not significant only because they add weight to the argument that these problems must be taken more seriously but also because they might herald an era where environmental degradation issues are used to justify social conflicts, criminality and military interventions around the world.

The case of environmental degradation as a causal factor for social conflicts and criminality is a ready example that best fit the understanding of the problem. In this context, we must understand the relationship between environment and society especially in terms of the negative social externalities and suggest ways in which the most destructive processes can be modified or overcome. Some of the necessary assumptions and characteristics of environment degradation, conflict and criminality are already evident in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria and other parts of the less developed counties of the world.

In this paper, we attempt to provide a clear conceptual and empirical analysis of environmental degradation, conflict and criminality. Conceptually, we provide clarity for all the variables under discourse and empirically, we rely on content analysis of the subject matter from the point of view of the Niger Delta.

Conceptual Discourse on Environmental Degradation

Environmental degradation is one of the most pressing issues in environmental discourse in recent times. Environmental degradation is the deterioration of the environment through depletion of

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resources such as air, water and soil; the destruction of ecosystems and the extinction of wildlife. It is defined as any change or disturbance to the environment perceived to be deleterious or undesirable (Nelson, 1997:520).

As a concept, environmental degradation is one of the Ten Threats officially cautioned by the High Level Threat Panel of the United Nations. The World Resources Institute (WRI), UNEP (the United Nations Environment Programme), UNDP (the United Nations Development Programme) and the World Bank have made public an important report on the issue of environmental degradation.

The United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR, 2004:16) defines environmental degradation as “The reduction of the capacity of the environment to meet social and ecological objectives, and needs”. Environmental degradation is of many types. When natural habitats are destroyed or natural resources are depleted, environment is degraded. Environmental degradation is a process through which the natural environment is compromised in some way, reducing biological diversity and the general health of the environment. This process can be entirely natural in origin, or it can be accelerated or caused by human activities. Many international organizations recognize environmental degradation as one of the major threats facing the planet, since humans have only been given one Earth to work with, and if the environment becomes irreparably compromised, it could mean the end of human existence.

Conceptualizing Environmental Conflict and Criminality

Almost every academic discipline has its theoretical approach of understanding conflicts—economists are focused on game-theory and decision-making, psychologist explore interpersonal conflicts, sociologists take status and class conflicts as the focal point, while political science is centered on intra-national and international conflicts (Heinz, 2010:4). This goes to tell us that conflict as a concept especially in the social sciences has multi-faceted definitions. However, for the purpose of this paper and by virtue of our sociological conviction, we here define conflict as the clashing of interests (positional differences) on national values of some duration and magnitude between at least two parties (organized groups, states, groups of states, organizations) that are determined to pursue their interests and win their cases (Hilk, 2005:2).

However, environmental conflict seems rather simplistic to define given the fact that any conflict that falls within the parameter of the struggle for environmental justice can be seen as such. The Environment and Conflicts Project (ENCOP, 2008:13) posits that:

“environmental conflicts manifest themselves as political, social, economic, religious or territorial conflicts, or conflicts over resources or national interests, or any other type of conflict. They are traditional conflicts induced by an environmental degradation”.

Environmental conflicts are usually complex in structure and history; they impact public interests and goods, including non-represented interests (e.g. future generations). ENCOP identified that environmental problems are seldom the only cause of conflicts. However, when interwoven with such elements as population growth, poverty and injustice they increasingly contribute to existing and future political tensions and their escalation to violent conflicts.

On the other hand, criminality is the habit of crime commission. It is the state of committing crime by individuals or a group of persons. Criminality within the environment therefore refers to any criminal behaviour resulting from the degradation of the environment. The case of the Niger Delta for instance where kidnapping, militancy and cult gang behaviours have dominated social life can be seen as a result of environmental degradation caused by the exploration and exploitation of oil in the region.

Empirical Issues in Environmental Degradation and Conflict: Lessons from the Niger Delta

We have clearly conceptualized environmental degradation in the section above. Here, our focus is to provide empirical discussion on the issue of environmental degradation and how this necessitates social conflict drawing from the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The choice of the Niger

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Delta region here is simply because it presents us with lots of empirical literature on the emergence, nature and dynamics of environmental related conflicts. In fact the conflict in the Niger Delta which is basically that of resource struggle and environmental justice has significant implications for global peace.

The presence of oil multinational corporations in the Niger Delta region and the continuous oil exploration within the environment of the people has resulted in severe degradation of the environment. Opukri and Ibaba (2008) carried out a study on oil induced environmental degradation in the Niger Delta region and conclude that it results in pollution of environment and internal population displacement. They adopted descriptive survey method of analysis using secondary data but it reflected only on one of the social effects of these activities on the people of Niger-Delta.

On the other hand, Aluko (2004) in his study on environmental degradation and its impact on the Niger-Delta region used primary data sourced from thirteen communities in the area employed descriptive analysis. He concludes that oil exploration activities in the region leading to environmental degradation are responsible for the high degree of poverty thereby generating a situation of resource conflict in the area. This study was based on one of the economic effects of environmental degradation.

In the same vein, Gabriel (2007) in his study on environmental issues and challenges in the Niger-Delta focuses on its impact on economic activities in the area. He employed a theoretical approach to highlight the emerging effects of the environmental hazards on the region and concluded that it has adverse effects on livelihood thereby causing social struggle for resources. The table below shows a historical account of resource conflict in the Niger Delta as adopted from Madubuike (2009).

TABLE 1: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES OF SOCIAL IDENTITY CONFLICTS AND RESOURCE CONTROL AGITATIONS IN THE NIGER DELTA

S/N	Associations	Nature of Conflict	Year	Social Identity	Demand	Fear of the people	Requirements
1	Izon youths Urohobo youths Itsekiri youths	Youth revolt against stop of middle men in the core Delta	1886	Ijaw Urohobo Itsekiri	Restoration of middlemen by the colonial authorities	Displacement of livelihood	Commitment and determination for fairness and justice
2	Isaac Adaka Boro's Revolt	Declaration of Niger Delta Republic	1966	Izon Ijaw	Self-determination and control of resources in the Niger Delta	Economic and political marginalization, underdevelopment	Courage, bravery, determination to achieve equity and fairness for the people
3	MOSOP	*Declaration of Ogoni nation and Ogoni Bill of rights. *Ogoni versus Shell war *Ogoni versus FG agencies: Police and Army	1990 1993 1997	Ogoni	Self-determination, control of resources in Ogoniland. Creation of Ogoni state and more LGAs	Oil exploitation, underdevelopment, political and economic marginalization, language extinction.	Courage, determination, consistence, focus and goal oriented struggle for justice, fairness and equity.
4	MEND	* Ijaw youth versus oil companies * Urohobo youths versus oil companies * Itsekiri youths versus oil companies * Chikoko youths versus oil companies * Isoko youths versus oil companies * Egi clan youths versus oil companies * Ikwerre youths versus oil companies * Delta youths policy statement; Kaiania declaration.	1998 to 2008	Ijaw Urohobo Itsekiri Chikoko Isoko Egi Ikwerre	Self determination, Niger Delta republic, Resource control, Political relevance, security of life and property	underdevelopment, language extinction, resource exploitation, environmental degradation, political and economic marginalization	Purposeful commitment, goal oriented struggle, consistence, emancipation, dignity and respect for the people.

Source: Madubuike, (2009:13)

The table above draws our curiosity into history to show that environmental resources account for conflict in the Niger Delta. It is clear from the table that marginalization, resource control and environmental degradation are key indices for conflict in the region.

The United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) report of June 1999 provided an overview of environmental conditions, resources and conflict. It gave the proposition that a growing trend in international and intranational conflict appears to be linked to the deteriorating environmental conditions and resources (UNEP, 1999:23). It is revealed that conflicts over water resources appear to be a major source of direct international conflict. The most common elements around which conflicts can erupt are water flow, diversion, salinization, floods and pollution. Resource depletion issues like deforestation, soil erosion, desertification, flooding and pollution commonly cause indirect international or indirect intranational conflict. The report went forth to reveal that from empirical evidence across all categories, it appears that the vast majority of environmentally related conflicts occur in developing regions.

By popular perception, the marginalization and balkanisation of the peoples of the Niger Delta, the despoliation of their environment and the resultant conflicts have their roots in the discovery of oil, exploitation, exploration and production activities by the oil multinationals in the late 1950s. The Niger Delta, a lush of mangrove swamps, rainforests and swampland is the site of rich oil and natural gas reserves in Nigeria. Oil accounts for about 90 per cent of Nigerian exports and more than 80 per cent of government revenue. Despite being the richest geopolitical region in terms of natural resource endowment, the Niger Delta's potential for sustainable development however remains unfulfilled, and is now increasingly threatened by environmental devastation and worsening economic conditions. Particularly threatened is the mangrove forest of Nigeria, the largest in Africa and sixty per cent of which is located in the Niger Delta. Also facing extinction are the fresh water swamp forests of the Delta, which at 11700 km square are the most extensive in West and Central Africa and the local people depend on this for sustenance (Akpobibibo, 2001:14).

Incidentally to, and indeed compounding this ecological devastation is the political marginalisation and total oppression of the people. Especially the denial of their rights, including land rights. In spite of the enormous wealth accrued from their land, the people continue to live in pristine conditions in the absence of electricity, pipe borne water, hospitals, housing and schools. The late environmentalist and minority rights crusader, Ken Saro-Wiwa summed it up by describing the pitiable situation of his 500,000 Ogoni people in the Niger Delta to have been consigned to slavery and extinction. The internationalisation of the Ogoni case in the 1990s committed a global audience into how environmental degradation relates to social conflict in the Niger Delta.

Empirical Relationship between Environmental Degradation and Criminality in the Niger Delta

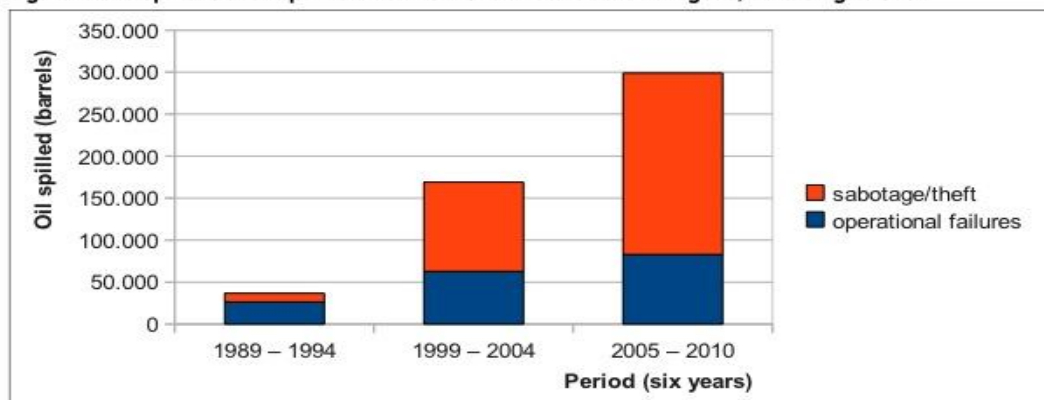
It is important to note that while the Nigerian State and oil multinational corporations operating in the Niger Delta region have folded their arms for a long time over the problem of environmental degradation, the problem reached its elastic limit with the emergence of new instruments of conflict which in their very dynamics qualify to be called crime. In this regard, criminal methods such as kidnapping, hostage taking and even robbery have gradually taking over the more peaceful conflicting relationship between the Niger Deltans and the oil companies.

As Akpabibibo (2001) puts it, the prevalence of environmental degradation and loss of rural livelihood systems in the region necessitated hostage taking, hijacking and kidnapping of expatriate oil company workers and demand of ransom and repeated invasion and blockading of oil installations within the region. Between 1993 and 2000 for instance, it is claimed that, the operations and activities of Shell were disrupted by about a hundred communal disturbances, leading to the loss of some 12 million barrels of crude oil worth about 369 billion Naira. In Ogoni land alone Shell has been losing about 8,000 barrels of crude oil per day since the Ogoni 'rally' of January 1993. In all, the company estimates that over 60 per cent of spills and leakage affecting its installations is caused

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by acts of sabotage by aggrieved oil producing communities of the Niger Delta. Below, is a data chart on oil spill incidence as compiled by Shell Petroleum Nigeria Limited:

Figure: Development of oil spill volumes from Shell-installations in Nigeria, according to Shell



The problem actually relates to the nature and intent of the data gatherers. Nevertheless, the data above shows that most of the oil spill incidents emanate from sabotage especially caused by oil bunkers a specific nature of criminality that arose in the region as a result of perceived injustice meted on the people by the state and their multinational cohorts. Whether oil spill is a product of sabotage or ruptured pipes, it portends grave dangers to the environment of the people and their livelihood systems.

Undermining the source of environmental degradation in the Niger Delta region, kidnapping and hostage taking seems to be the new tactics of aggressive feedback from the people towards the Nigeria State and the oil multinational companies. Thus according to Akpabio and Akpan (2009) Violent crimes such as armed robbery, hostage taking, and kidnapping in the Niger Delta region is a product of the liberation fight that has characterized the region for quite some time now. The table below shows incidences of such fights including hostage taking and kidnap incidences in the region.

Table 2: Selected Cases of Niger Delta Liberation Fights

<i>Year</i>	<i>Cases</i>
2003	Troops are sent to the oilfields amid clashes between rival Ijaw and Itsekiri groups. Around 30 people die. In April, militants seize four Niger Delta oil rigs, taking some 270 people hostage, 97 of them foreigners. After negotiations, the hostages are released.
2004	Five Nigerians and two Americans working for Chevron Texaco are killed by pirates in the Niger Delta. Fighting between groups seeking to control the oilfields leaves some 500 people dead in Port Harcourt and surrounding regions, according to Amnesty International. In October, the groups reach a ceasefire agreement.
2005	Six oil workers including two Germans are kidnapped, then freed three days later.
2006	January: Separatist gunmen kidnap four foreign oil workers and blow up a pipeline feeding an export terminal. Five days later, gunmen shoot dead several troops and attack a Shell oil plant. The four foreigners—an American, a Briton, a Bulgarian and a Hungarian—are freed at the end of the month, but the group threatened to take further hostages. February: An armoured government helicopter is brought in to fire on barges being used to smuggle oil near a separatist militant base. Militants strike back later, firing on the aircraft. Separatists kidnap nine foreigners—three Americans, one Briton, two Egyptians, two Thais and a Filipino—working for a Shell subcontractor. The attack forces Shell to suspend exports from a major terminal. Six of the hostages are freed after a week, but the other three are held until late in March. April: The US firm Exxon Mobil briefly evacuates non-essential staff from its Nigerian oil installations due to fear of an attack by militants. At the end of the month, separatist militants used a car bomb to attack oil tanker trucks, and warn China not to invest in the Nigerian oil industry. May: Nine officials for the Italian. Petrol company Eni SpA were killed when armed members of MEND attacked Eni SpA's security forces in Port Harcourt. MEND militants briefly occupied and robbed a bank near the Eni SpA base, leaving at about 3:30 p.m, about an hour after they showed up. A company official stated, "Eni has temporarily evacuated staff and contractors from the area of the base affected by the incident and the situation is currently under control." May: Three foreign oil workers, one an Italian, are seized but released after a day. A Nigerian court orders Shell to pay 1.5 billion dollars in compensation to the Ijaw people of the Niger Delta for environmental damage, but the company says it is appealing the ruling. May 10: an executive with the United States-based oil company, Baker Hughes, was shot and killed in the southeastern city of Port Harcourt. At the time of the shooting, it was not immediately known if MEND had any involvement or not. Witnesses say the attacker appeared to be specifically targeting the American executive. June 2: Militants abduct six Britons, an American and a Canadian from a Norwegian-run drilling rig off the coast of Bayelsa state. June 20: Two Filipinos, workers of PGF Explorations Limited, an oil servicing contract company to Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC), were on Tuesday kidnapped by unknown gunmen at P. W. J Jetty in Rumuohumeni area of Port Harcourt. August 20: Ten members of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) were killed by the Nigerian military. The members were working on releasing a Royal Dutch Shell hostage. October, 2: Ten Nigerian soldiers were killed off the shore of the Niger Delta in their patrol boat by a MEND mortar shell. Earlier that day a Nigerian/Royal Dutch Shell convoy was attacked on in the Port Harcourt region resulting to some wounded. November, 20: Two former militants killed in a raid by an unidentified armed group at the premises of a non-governmental organisation AAPW (Academic Associates Peace Works) in Port Harcourt. November, 27: A British oil worker, kidnapped with 6 others from a Saipem oil rig, was killed in crossfire when the kidnappers ran into a Navy patrol later in the day of the abduction.

Source: Akpabio and Akpan 2009

The notion of liberation in the Niger Delta was and still is rooted in the quest for environmental and resource justice. On this note, kidnapping was first used as a weapon to fight for economic and environmental justice in the Niger Delta, the economic motivation was intermittently used as a means to fund and sustain the fight. The beginning of 2007 saw the emergence of various other criminal groups by various names who hide under liberation struggle to commit economic crimes. It takes few persons to organise somebody's kidnap. In this case the victim would be snatched and taken to a safe location. Such operation is always well- planned and well- executed.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Environmental degradation is a serious source of worry both at the local and international levels. In this paper, we have shown that it is a great challenge to the Niger Delta people and the Nigeria State at large. The problems associated with the environment in the region has raised a large army of youths who are largely divided into those who rightly fight for resource and environmental justice and those who hide under the just struggle to perpetrate all forms of criminal acts such as hostage taking and kidnapping in the region.

What is sad about this is the inability of the State security agents to combat this crime because they are very ill equipped. The spread of criminality as a business itself, has to do with long period of governmental neglects of the region, causing its people to aggressively adopt militant confrontation in

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a bid to force government attention to the plight of the region. At the moment, various levels of governments have stepped up developmental attention in the region in a bid to curb the rising incidence of the crime. However, the problem lies in how politically committed is the Federal Government of Nigeria on these developmental interest. The paper believes that the Niger Delta problem deserves serious governmental attention.

In conclusion, it is safe to argue that while the environment is a major economic resource for us, we nevertheless have caused serious damage to it thereby invoking negative feedbacks. The Niger Delta region is a key example of these feedbacks resulting from long years of oil exploration and exploitation. The emergence of social conflict and criminality notwithstanding, the Nigeria Government can still create a semblance of peace if they apply genuine policy creation and implementation to the problem of environmental degradation in the region.

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