

**THE SOCIO- ECONOMIC DIMENSION OF ENVIRONMENTAL OIL RELATED
CONFLICT IN THE NIGER DELTA REGION OF NIGERIA, 1990-2010**

By

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ABSTRACT: *Nigeria over the years had been beset by differing environmental problems caused mostly by human and natural factors. Such environmental problems had remained a source of crisis, especially in the Niger Delta. This paper explores the socio-economic dimension of environmental oil related crisis in Nigeria; Niger Delta oil-producing region. It partly discusses the environmental perspective of the crisis as it relates to oil and gas exploration in Nigeria. Set within the framework of the quest for a clean, safe and habitable environment, the study focuses on the experiences of Niger Delta region vis-a-vis oil pollution as major factor for socio-economic and political struggle by the people. By using both primary and secondary source materials, the paper further argues that while there are other factors responsible for the severe environmental pollution characteristic of the Niger Delta region, the damage and neglect associated with oil and gas production by oil companies had remained dominant in the conflict, with attendant effect on water and land economic resources. With the realization that the main socio-economic and political struggle of the Niger Delta people had for decades centred on the constant environmental pollution, the study concludes that there is urgent need for policy reform by government that would enable the people and settlements of the Niger Delta region in Nigeria to benefit from revenue accruing to federal government and multinational oil corporations.*

Key words, Environment, Pollution, Conflict, Niger Delta, Government

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The raging crisis in the oil-producing communities of Niger Delta region in Nigeria has become subject of discussion among scholars, individuals, corporate and non-governmental organizations globally. Again, that the lingering socio-economic crisis associated with environmental oil pollution has continued unabated in the Niger Delta region is undoubted. Taking this into

consideration, this paper investigates how environmental degradation has led to socio-economic and political deprivation of people that bear the burden of oil production which contributed more than 90% of total government revenue and annual budget. Scholars like Ashton, (1995), Frynas, (2000), Ikelegbe, (2005) and Aghalino, (2009) have expressed concern about the total neglect of these oil producing communities by successive governments which has led to an ever-worsening environmental degradation impinging on the livelihood of Niger Delta people, particularly the Ogoni and Ijaws. This paper therefore focuses mainly on the perennial struggle for a clean, safe and secure environment, socio-economic benefits, political freedom and equality by the Niger Delta people. It will be shown that the people's deprivation by government and oil companies to have access to oil revenue has engendered conflict and strained relationship in the region.

INTRODUCTION

According to environmental experts from the UK, the USA and Nigeria, the Niger Delta is rated as the most oil-impacted environment and polluted area in the world (Kia, 2009; Ikelegbe, 2005; Obi, 2000). A major contributor to this is the perennial flaring of associated gas during oil production, which has impacted on the natural and human environment, making these areas a danger to local communities. The United Nations Environmental Programme is now focussing on reducing the effects of gas flaring around the world, particularly in the Niger Delta (Leslie, 2005). Flaring is a means of disposing of waste gases that are a natural by-product of oil production (Omoweh, 1995), and occurs during the processing of crude oil through the top of a pipe or stack in which the burner and igniters are located (Aghalino, 2002; Okogun, 2004; Eweje, 2006). This illustrates that gas in the production process burns clean until oil enters into the flare pipelines through the operating machine, and this has become common practice (Ikporukpo, 1986). Gas flaring began in Oloibiri in 1958 (Ockuko, 2011), when the economic value and market for gas was low and there were no pipelines or storage tanks to preserve it. However, burning gas was wasteful and destructive to the Niger Delta environment, (Public Records Office, PRO file 371/1671170) as recognised by British Trade Commissioner J.S. Sadler in 1963:

... *Shell's* need to continue, probably indefinitely, to flare off a very large proportion of the associated gas they produce... it will be interesting to see the extent to which the oil companies feel it necessary to meet these criticisms by spending money on uneconomic method of using gas.

The Niger Delta region was found to be the second largest flare site in the world, after Russia, with World Bank report showing that over 150 million cubic meters of natural gas were flared or vented annually in Nigeria, worth up to \$30.6 billion dollars and equivalent to 25 percent of US gas consumption, or 30 percent of European Union (EU) gas used in a given year (World Bank, 2008; World Bank, 2009).

CONCEPT OF ENVIRONMENTAL POLLUTION

The environment, according to Gao (1998) is a complex system of biotic and abiotic elements and physical and chemical phenomena that condition the life, development and activity of living organisms. This includes the interaction of humans, flora, fauna, soil, water, climate, landscape, historical monuments, mineral resources and other physical structures, as well as interdependence among organisms. Mankind's efforts to control and domesticate the natural environment have led to numerous environmental problems and widespread environmental degradation (HRW, 1999; Jain, 1977; Joseph, 1997). The same applies to the Niger Delta, where the production of oil after the 1950s has led to widespread environmental problems in oil producing communities.

Environmental problems associated with oil production in the Niger Delta include the contamination of nitrogen, phosphorous and sulphur, useful for the preservation of soil nutrients and fertility; widespread air, water and soil pollution; the creation of waste that cannot be disposed of in a short time or recycled; and the depletion of resources that cannot be replenished (Jike, 2004). According to the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP, 2009), in their study on the environmental impact of oil in the Niger Delta, all these environmental problems also pose a wider threat to the health of the global environment, especially through their contribution to climate change.

The operations of *Shell Nigeria* and *Chevron Nigeria* had brought changes to the Delta environment and its inhabitants. Scientific evidence by Augustine and William (1976) confirmed that gas flaring released gaseous substances such as nitrogen, sulphur oxides and carbon-monoxide into the oil-producing Delta environment, polluting vegetation, soil and the general climate. The Niger Delta people experienced untold environmental devastation and health hazards, including 'acid rain' that polluted water courses and corroded metals. In spite of *Shell's* claims, Frynas (2001) submits that the company's promise to end gas flaring in the oil-producing

communities was not achieved. Flaring of gas in the area was still taking place up till date. We can argue that the cost of perennial gas flaring in Niger Delta area cannot be quantified, in terms of wasted energy resources; but, it was not only an ecological disaster and crime against the local people but also largely continued without a possible solution. Oil production has distorted the people's pre-colonial economic activities due to pollution of water, soil, vegetation and climatic conditions. In addition, the saboteurs of pipelines can partly be held responsible for spills in the oil-producing area.

Evidence from *Tell Magazine* (1993) presents a vivid picture of the devastated impact of oil pollution on the Delta bio-diversity:

What [the Niger Delta people] used to call upon for their livelihood and well-being has been wrecked for eternity by the coming of oil and its exploitation by the Nigerian state. They cannot fish because marine life has been flushed out, they cannot hunt because the game fled a long time ago, thanks to the oil hunters, and their land no longer yields good harvest.

Bio-diversity in any human environment or habitation, according to Ashton (1998) and Avwunudiogba (2003), is beneficial for the air, water purification, social conservation, and reduction of the harmful natural effects in such an environment. The absence of these factors particularly in Ogoni and Ijaw communities has led to rapid climate change and a worsening environmental damage. The Niger Delta people had lost their plants and marine organisms as a result of oil pollution for over 50 years.

An example of oil spills into Ijaw area was a case of Oloibiri's environment which occurred after the abandoned oil well 14, shut since 1978 released oil in 2004. Oral evidence shows that the well had been leaking from the source for many years without response from *Shell-BP* (Obeche, 2010). About 20,000 barrels were spilled in the incident. The SPDC responded promptly for a clean-up at the time. A report from a recent scientific investigation by UNEP into abandoned oil-producing communities of Ogoni and Ijaws shows that *Shell-BP* and *Chevron*, among other oil operators, had contaminated the soil and bio-diversity of those oilfields (Guardian, 2005). Oil, claimed to have been cleaned up by the companies, was still seen seeping out from Oloibiri, Bomu and Afam, after many years.

Table 1: Types of oil spills and number reported in Eastern Niger Delta, 1987- 1996

Year	Total spills reported	Equipment failure	Human Error	Sabotage
1987	105	28	12	65
1988	102	19	28	55
1989	113	34	39	40
1990	125	46	15	64
1991	126	39	20	67
1992	157	41	53	63
1993	166	38	32	96
1994	203	49	27	127
1995	263	37	39	187
1996	269	31	29	209
Total	1629	362	294	973

Source: NNPC 1997.

This table illustrates that the number of spills caused by sabotage rose maximally over the years compared to those caused by equipment failures and human errors.

On a general note, we argue that the causes of oil spills must be attributed to both the local people as well as the oil companies. *Shell* claimed that most communities indulged in sabotage to prevent the company from stopping oil spills with the aim of earning more compensation or to create more clean-up work for their people (*Shell*, 2004). However, the problem of perpetuation should be linked with the Federal government, because they had shown unflinching supports for oil operators through military attacks that led to youth restiveness and militancy in Ogoni, Ijaw and the entire Niger Delta region.

Another dimension of the crisis is that the environmental problems that faced the Delta region during the period under review were many. Greenpeace has accused *Shell-BP* of causing environmental pollution in the Niger Delta. The *Greenpeace* organization affirmed that the Niger Delta was an ecological disaster, linked directly to its operation in the 1990s (Jaspid, David & Olof, 1995). *Shell* which based its argument on the World Bank report on the environmental and development threat in the Niger Delta in 1995, responded that the issue of oil spills and gas flaring was found well below many other factors that affected the environment. Flaring of gas, according to this report, was a wasteful emission of greenhouse gases, but no notable

acidification of rainwater was found near flaring sites. This implies that oil pollution in most Delta communities was only a moderate priority when compared with the full scale of environmental problems found across the entire Niger Delta (World Bank, 1995). Fagbami (1988) and Duru (1981) contend that damage linked to oil spills and gas was from consumptive rather than productive or industrial sources, as with most pollutants in the Delta and Nigeria at large. For instance, they argue that the pollution in Tsekelewu oil field near Port Harcourt, which affected the plants, could not be linked to the effects of oil on the flora and fauna in this area.

Although this study focuses on environmental oil pollution, it must be placed within a wider perspective. Many Delta people have lost their traditional jobs, such as farming and fishing, as a result of an oil-polluted and degraded environment. However in agreement with World Bank report (1995), other factors also led to the pollution in the Niger Delta. For example, sewage, vehicular emissions, solid waste and toxic waste were major contributors. Clearly, oil and gas pollution were not the only factors responsible for environmental degradation in the oil producing communities of the Niger Delta region.

Table 2: Exhibit 10 World Bank Report Ranking of Environmental Issues in Nigeria

Category	High Priority	Moderate Priority	Lower Priority
Land Resource	Agricultural land degradation, flooding(moderate high)	Coastal erosion, Riverbank erosion	Sea level rise
Renewal Resource degradation	Fisheries depletion, deforestation; biodiversity loss, water hyacinth expansion	Fisheries habitat degradation	Mangrove degradation, Nypa palm expansion
Environmental pollution	Sewage, vehicular emissions, municipal solid wastes, toxic and hazardous substances	Oil pollution, industrial effluents, industrial air emissions, industrial solid wastes	Gas flaring

Source: Jaspid Singh, David Moffat and Olof Linden. Defining and Environmental Development Strategy for the Niger Delta, May 24th 1995, World Bank; West Central Africa Department, Industrial & Energy Operations Division, vol.1. p.viv.

This table reveals that the environmental problems found in the Niger Delta were many. Oil and gas pollution were contributory factors with attendant effects on land degradation. This however did not detract from claims that oil and gas constituted substantial proportion of the environmental problems in the oil-producing communities of the Delta region.

Environmental problems associated with the social, economic and political impact of oil on the Delta people precipitated chain reactions from the youth and local people, with the Federal government, rather than addressing their problems, becoming more repressive. From a wider perspective, the conflict over oil-related matters in the Delta communities, although mainly an environmental struggle, also encompassed the social, economic and political struggle, leading the Niger Delta people to regard the Federal government as deliberately marginalising them. The entire Delta oil-producing communities were alienated politically and economically in terms of wealth accruing from oil resources. Poverty and lack of physical development in the oil-producing communities could also be linked to total neglect by the Federal Government.

Social Dimension of the Niger Delta Conflict

The social problems of oil pollution in the Delta area had been linked to years of neglect by the Federal government, *Shell BP* and *Chevron Nigeria*. Such neglect had frustrated efforts at ensuring a clean environment. Scholars like (Alagoa, 2003; Jain, 1977,) argued that oil and gas extraction in the Niger Delta, rather than alleviating the problems of the oil-producing communities through meaningful development, had led to inhalation of poisonous gases on a daily basis. This was an example of the perennial environmental situation the Ijaw and Ogoni people had suffered and borne for the previous five decades.

The perennial oil and gas pollution also led to displacement of the Niger Delta people in the affected communities. An informant from one Ijaw community claimed that their relocation was necessary in order to escape the hazards of a polluted and degraded environment. Field evidences reveal that whenever there is pollution in any part of the land, the discharged chemicals are very poisonous and sometimes bring diseases that often result in death or severe health problem. However, Ikelegbe (2005) argues that the relocation to safe environments in the Niger Delta did not resolve their problems because they had to start their life again. For instance, Gerdicks, (2001) and Frynas, (2000) argue that the oil blowout by a *Shell* pipeline in Jesse Creek and Jones Creek in the Ijaw area left many homeless and killed more than 700. Added to this, Intelligence

Reports on this issue show that *Chevron Nigeria* had offered no relief materials to the affected people of Opia when their traditional local economic activities were destroyed through oil spills in the 1990s (National Archive Enugu NAE, 452).

In the same vein, the Ikwoke people of Andoni community in the Eastern Delta also suffered this odd fate as their migration did not resolve the problems of displacement. Most of the Ikwoke people, particularly the farmers and fishers, had left their own village in search of drinking water from other villages not affected by pollution, or migrated to new places. We argue that the oil spillage had contaminated the rivers they used for fishing and they were forced to migrate from the Okrika Local Government Area of Rivers State to Azuzuama community in the Southern Ijaw Local Government Area of Bayelsa State to continue their fishing and farming activities. Evidence shows that those who settled in Sapele became aliens and had no choice but to settle in the slum areas of their host communities, where there were no satisfactory jobs. This rural-urban drift led to high crime, inadequate housing, unemployment, too many people on few social facilities, among other factors which had accounted for further escalation of the Niger Delta conflict.

The devastation of the Delta's wildlife particularly those living within the swampy area had encouraged forced migration of many local hunters into other parts of the Hinterland, such as Isoko, Urhobo, Ibos, Warri and Port-Harcourt. Aghalino (2009) believes that such movement became necessary in seeking good fortunes, since hunting was a source of income. Problems associated with migration included sanitation, unemployment and high crime rate in the urban centres of Warri, Sapele and Port-Harcourt. As a result of this neglect by the government and the oil companies, we argue that it was a major factor which sparked-off the conflict and struggle for freedom by the local people in the Niger Delta

Fire disasters that occurred in the oil-producing areas were linked to oil pipeline blowouts. Lives and property had been destroyed in some Ijaw and Ogoni villages, such as the Kolo, Jones and Jesse Creeks during the 1980s and 1990s. An eye witness account reveals the devastating effects of the fire in their villages during this time, signifying the level of human degradation they had to bear as a result of oil exploration and production (Interview with Chief Edward, 2010). We share the view of this respondent because despite the environmental degradations suffered in order for

the Nigerian government to have a lion share of the oil proceeds, adequate compensation required to create permanent solution to their problems were not made available.

Furthermore, the Increasing rate of antisocial behaviour in the Niger Delta villages and towns were linked with the attendant effects of oil and gas pollution (Catherine, 2001). Oral evidence given by Elder Edward in Ijawland also confirmed that oil pollution increased rates of crime, prostitution, unemployment and health challenges, which demoralised the local people. Many of the Delta people, particularly the Ogonis and Ijaws had lost their traditional occupations, such as farming, fishing, and craftsmanship, largely as a result of the environmental degradation caused by oil extraction. This became their option of survival in the midst of oil wealth found in their homeland but from which they could not derive real benefit.

An informant on the increasing wave of prostitution in the entire Niger Delta remarked thus:

Most young ladies have been forced to move to other non-oil producing states in Nigeria such as Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Kaduna, Jos, and Abuja. Some have been deceitfully lured into overseas like Italy, Britain, USA, Saudi-Arabia, Germany, France, Canada, Spain and Malaysia for prostitution, because oil has polluted their livelihood.

This significantly revealed the alternative ways the Niger Delta oil-producing communities had resorted to, that their future lives and aspirations were uncertain, particularly as a result of the government's attitude toward addressing their plight.

Lastly, the relationship between the local oil-producing communities and the oil companies became strained, as was clear from the oil operators' refusal to clean up the mess brought by their operations, and particularly in the refusal to pay full compensations to the affected landowners. *Shell BP* and *Chevron* claimed that most of the oil spills had occurred through sabotage by the Niger Delta youth, and thus were not liable for compensation. Conversely, the Niger Delta people believed that the oil companies were seeking a scapegoat rather than taking necessary steps to curtail and clean up the degraded and polluted environment. These conflicting arguments notwithstanding, this paper suggests that the ordinary local people, particularly, women children and became most vulnerable in terms of displacement from homes, poverty and continuous deprivation by the government and oil companies.

Economic Dimension of the Niger Delta Conflict

The perennial pollution of Niger Delta environment has increasingly led to loss of traditional jobs and rampant cases of unemployment. Many of the local people rely on fishing and farming, which Ashton (1995) claims had witnessed a sharp reduction as a result of “oil spills which spread quite extensively on the only stream that provided (the) source of drinking water for the area”. The grass, palm trees and other forms of vegetation within the Delta village communities had suffered similar pollution.

A study by Avwunudiogba (2003), on this issue has revealed that the loss of employment in traditional farming encouraged the local people in the Delta’s oil rich areas to combine ways of income from fishing and farming; fishing and trading; fishing and hunting; and fishing and brewing. Frynas(1998) and Ukeje (2001) have argued that the loss of the agriculture and fishing business had crippled their economic wellbeing, especially in the 1990s. This paper have identified that the ever-worsening impact of oil and gas pollution on the Delta like the Ogonis/Ijaws greatly affected their economic skills and their earning capacity, especially in the fishing trade. Overfishing, coupled with the environmental problems of pollution, were factors responsible for the loss of jobs among the fishers (Ashton, 1995). This explains the decisions of most of these fishers and farmers to adopt a combination of jobs as another means of raising more money to meet their basic needs.

In addition, most Delta people, both skilled and unskilled, were forced to leave their settlements in search of better opportunities in urban centres. The rural-urban drift led to sharp reduction in the level of economic growth and the development of oil-producing communities, especially during the 1990s. A respondent stated that many of their husbands could not provide for their needs and most young school leavers were forced to work as domestic servants in Warri and Port-Harcourt (Interview with Agnes, 2011). World Bank (2008) reported that about 50 percent of the Niger Delta youth between the ages of 15 and 24 became unemployed as a result of the oil-related associated environmental problems. Evidence by Brown (2006) shows that Oloibiri, an Ijaw town where the first commercial oil production started, was worst hit by increasing youth unemployment, estimated at 50 percent of the entire population.

The two tables (3-4) below illustrate that the states occupied by the Delta people, such as, Bayelsa, Rivers, and Cross Rivers in the South-south, were worst hit by youth unemployment

when compared to other states in the Niger Delta and Nigeria. This resulted in an increase in youth violence and militancy in the oil-producing states of the Niger Delta.

Table 3: Unemployment and underemployment rates in Niger Delta states, 2006

State	Unemployment	Underemployment
Akwa-Ibom	11.3	33.7
Bayelsa	6.8	19.4
Cross-River	1.8	12.0
Delta	9.3	29.2
Edo	8.0	30.9
Rivers	11.4	25.3
South-south	8.8	26.2
Nigeria	5.3	20.2

Source: Nigeria Core Welfare Indicators Questionnaire 2006

Table 4: Youth (15-24) unemployment and under-employment rates

Area	Unemployment	Underemployment
Akwa-Ibom	33	24
Bayelsa	19	16
Cross River	5	9
Delta	21	27
Edo	22	37
Rivers	29	20
South-south	24	22
Nigeria	14	172

Source: Nigeria Core Welfare Indicators Questionnaire 2006.

Table 5: Poverty statistics for the Niger Delta states

States	Poverty incidence %	Core poor (%) (quintiles)	Self-Assessed poverty level	Very poor (%) (self-assessed)	Gini
Akwa Ibom	35	27	66	17	0.5003

Bayelsa	20	22	95	62	0.4757
Cross River	42	33	77	22	0.5046
Delta	45	23	81	25	0.4650
Edo	33	16	79	35	0.4585
Rivers	29	19	67	15	0.4792
South-South	35	23	77	29	0.5072
North East	72	35.4	81	26.5	0.4590
Nigeria	54	21.3	76	21.37	0.4882

Source: Nigeria Living Standard Survey (NLSS) 2004, National Bureau of Statistics, cited in the World Bank Document 2008, p.14

The above table illustrates the high level of inequality among the Niger Delta states, given the amount of wealth accruing from the oil proceeds. It shows that three out of every ten people in the South-South area were very poor. The high prices of goods had reduced their purchasing power in comparison to those employed in the oil companies and the rest of the country.

Clearly, the constant transmission of the un-burnt carbon into the soil brought destruction and near extinction to the Delta vegetation, and created permanent hardship and economic disorganisation and underdevelopment for most oil-producing communities. It could be said that oil production has resulted in the reduction of earnings by the oil companies, whilst the oil-producing communities in Niger Delta had suffered wanton destruction of rivers that generated income for their livelihood. Thus, their struggle could be linked with economic deprivation by the Federal Government and the oil multinationals.

Political Dimension of the Niger Delta Conflict

The many years of oppression, marginalisation and denial of basic rights of the Niger Delta region by the central government cast light on absurd nature of oil the politics in Nigeria. It is observed that despite the huge oil wealth explored and produced on their homeland, the people have been subjected to poverty and consistently been the target of government's military attacks to protect state interest and that of the oil multinationals. This has been the case in other regions of the world where crude oil forms the major source of revenue for central governments. Power politics has been employed by a few rich to the detriment of the local people from whose land the wealth was derived. It is evidently clear that countries having oil as their main resource of their economy often resort to the use of oppression and force to curb local resistance (Phillippe,

2005; Michele, 2004). This has been the case with some African oil rich regions such as Angola, Algeria, Libya, and Nigeria. Oil has led to conflicts between the federal government and the local people as a result of environmental devastation brought by oil production without taking care of their basic needs

Ikelegbe (2005) contends that the decades of oil exploitation, environmental degradation and state neglect have created an impoverished, marginalised, and exploited citizenry, which after more than two decades produced a resistance of which the youth were in the vanguard. This situation has brought about the suffering and neglect of the Niger Delta people, and made complicated as a result of the power politics played by a few elites at Federal, State and Local Government levels. The oil companies were partners in the political oppression, especially against individuals, villages or towns which opposed their business interests in the entire Delta region. Evidence from the oldest oil community of Oloibiri in Ijawland showed examples of abuse of human rights and marginalisation or neglect by the Federal government for over five decades. This Ijaw community had been forgotten in terms of infrastructural facilities, and political representation within the central government. O'Neil (2007) contends that this town lacked new development or a single modern industry.

Table 6: Nigerian Government 1960-1999

Period of rule	Head of State	Type of Govt.	Ethnic origin	How the rule ended
1960-66	Balewa	Civilian	Hausa	Attempted coup/assassination
1966	Ironsi	Military	Ibo	Coup/assassination
1966-75	Gowon	Military	Angas/Middle Belt	Coup
1975-76	Mohammed	Military	Hausa	Attempted coup/assassination
1976-79	Obasanjo	Military	Yoruba	Elections
1979-83	Shagari	Civilian	Hausa	Coup
1984-85	Buhari	Military	Fulani	Coup
1985-93	Babangida	Military	Minority Group in the Niger State	Election, results nullified in June 1993, stepped down in Aug 1993
1993	Shoneka	Civilian	Yoruba	Head of interim Govt, Coup

1993-98	Abacha	Military	Kanuri	Presumed heart attack
1998-99	Abubakar	Military	Middle Belt Group	Elections
1999-	Obasanjo	Civilian	Yoruba	

Source: Frynas, 2000, p.43

This table illustrates the neglect and biased nature of the political system and representation in Nigeria. It shows that no person ever held the highest political position from the oil producing communities of Delta states from which over the years the bulk of government revenue has been derived. The North, Middle Belt and the South-West ethnic groups had dominated the political power, and by implication had exercised control over the oil resources in the Niger Delta. It was not until recently in 2011 that an Ijaw man, President Goodluck Jonathan was elected President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

According to Aghalino (2009) and Nmnimo (1999), the clash of interests among oil-producing villages led to internal division and conflict, especially among the youth and chiefs, the community and the urban elites. For instance, intelligence report has revealed the Ijaws against Itsekiris conflict of interest over Warri province (NAE, 96/1/106/1956). This was rooted in the discovery of oil after the 1950s, particularly the development of Warri into an oil rich province by the Federal government and the oil multinationals (NAE, 96//1/180/56; NAE, OLG, 38/4/18/56). A Provincial confidential report revealed that both the Ijaws and the Itsekiris have claimed ownership over the area in order to maximise the benefits from the compensation paid for land degradation and environmental loss by *Shell* and *Chevron* petroleum companies (NAE, OLG/38/2/56).

Similarly, an intelligence report on the Ijaw/Itsekiri crisis over Warri reveals that the Ijaw people founded Warri and not the Itsekiri or Urhobo people:

The Ijaws of Ogbe-Ijoh were the founders of Warri Town by (sic) scratch and had been there for long before the adventures of other tribes, traders and Government... Before the government of Great Britain sent their Consuls to Warri area for administrative purposes, the Ogbe-Ijoh people had been very old at Warri they were the people directly under the Consulate Warri in those days (NAE, 96/1/106/20).

We argue that the political clash among these oil-rich centres was directly linked to the presence of oil. They wanted access to the revenue accruing from the sale of crude, especially to enhance the socio-economic development of their communities.

A similar case was the creation of Delta State in 1991 by the Babangida military administration for the Ijaw people which to a large extent led to increased tension and dissatisfaction amongst the Urhobo and Itsekiri communities for lack of political representation in the state and local government areas (World Bank, 2008). The relocation of the local government headquarters from Ogbah-Ijoh to Ogidigbon, an Itsekiri area, angered the Ijaw people in March 1997. Although, the Delta State Assembly had since passed a bill that relocated the LGA headquarter back to Ijaw speaking area of Warri in 1999 for peaceful co-existence. These internal conflicts clearly show the level of struggle for power and political representation within the Niger Delta politics as a whole, particularly on land, economic resources, for justice and social recognition.

Oil politics in the Niger Delta brought about a struggle for chieftaincy, the emergence of youth organisations, unbridled quest for power and a breakdown of law and order. The World Bank reports that Nembe was an example of a community in which the locals and the chiefs had disagreed over the sharing of compensation payment made by *Shell-BP* (World Bank, 2008; Watts, 2004). It explains the decisions made by the youths in the 1990s, stating that since the Federal government had resolved on taking total control of oil resources on their land without increasing the allocation, there would always be riots and protests within the communities. The proliferation of civil right movements like, MEND (Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta) in the 2000s was rooted in the government's negative attitude to their sufferings.

Political unrest and internal struggle by the Delta people had been further heightened by enactment of those petroleum decrees and legislations that outlawed their rights and powers over their own land. As Onduku (2001) writes, the Federal government, while making the petroleum legislation, did not seek the consent of the Niger Delta people. This aggravated the conflict and struggle for resource control and full compensation for a worsening and devastated environment, which plunged the Niger Delta oil-rich zone into continual chaos, crisis, and conflict with both the Federal government and the oil companies up to 2010. The persistence of the crisis, instability and conflicts up to the present is only a reflection of government's insensitivity to the plight of the Niger Delta people, as well as the huge oil revenue losses to the nation.

CONCLUSION

This paper has clearly shown the nature and dimensions of environmental conflict associated with oil and gas production in the Niger Delta region. It contends that the associated environmental problems brought by oil pollution destroyed land, water and fisheries, and precipitated chains of reactions from the local people. Oil pollution brought ill-health, death, displacement, and loss of jobs and increased the level of social crime and prostitution in the oil-producing area. It becomes clear that, the Niger Delta environmental problems brought the social, economic and political deprivations which sparked-off the constant conflict in the region, because the government, rather than resolving these problems, preferred the adoption of repressive measures.

The unbearable economic marginalisation found in most Niger Delta communities from the 1990s up to the late 2000 largely encouraged the people's struggle against Federal government and oil multinationals. Most Delta people had farmed and fished, surviving on their traditional economic mode of production before the production of crude oil which eventually polluted and degraded their means of livelihood. It can thus be argued that what the Niger Delta people wanted was a fair share from the oil wealth in terms of modern development rather than sitting atop of oil fields with little benefit for their suffering. They wanted adequate electricity, good roads, pipe-borne water, employment, health care delivery centres, and access to quality education. They like others, find it difficult to understand why such benefits could be found in Europe and America, where oil wealth had transformed the life of the inhabitants, but not the situation with Nigeria.

Thus, the main social, economic and political struggle or conflict of the Niger Delta people since the 1990s had centred on the constant environmental pollution and the need to benefit from revenue accruing from oil to Federal government and oil multinationals. Such conflicts have the potential to persist unless concrete steps are taken by government to address the problems associated with environmental degradation and severe pollution caused by oil exploration in the region.

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