

# **AN INTERFACE BETWEEN ENVIRONMENT AND POVERTY: A CASE STUDY OF NIGER DELTA REGION IN NIGERIA**

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## **Abstract**

Since the environment man lives in affects him either positively or negatively, it behoves him therefore to protect and manage this environment very well for his own benefit. Thus, in Third World countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America, most people depend on the natural resources as a means of livelihood. In Nigeria, for instance, the government and its agencies in particular and the people as a whole owe it a responsibility to manage, conserve, preserve and sustain the environment. According to the United Nations (2002), 189 countries signed the millennium declaration, which led to the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals, one of which is to ensure environmental sustainability. Unfortunately, however, where the reverse becomes the case the consequence is usually enormous. For example, desertification, degradation, de-forestation, pollution (air and water), acid rain and other problems that are dangerous to earth and to human beings become the order of the day. What is more, those people who depend on the natural resources for their means of livelihood become impoverished. This study identifies environmental problems in the Niger Delta Region that are occasioned by man's activities on the environment. In particular, it points out that as a result of the exploitation of the natural resources like oil among others and the consequent inability to manage the environment effectively, poverty has become the order of the day in that region. It also analyzes government's efforts at the environmental management, control and sustainability. The study concludes by suggesting ways for effective management and sustainability for the optimal use, growth and development of people in particular and the nation as a whole.

**Key Words:** Environment, Poverty, Niger Delta and Governance.

## **Introduction**

There is no gain saying the fact that man's activities on the environment in which he lives have the capacity either to develop or de-develop him. This underscores the importance of environmental sustainability in order to reduce the negative effects of man's activities on environment.

Indeed, in order to control and reduce the environmental problems, governments, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and international organizations, have harped on the

need for environmental protection and sustainability. Consequently, governments all over the world including Nigeria adopted the proposal. Since then successive Nigerian governments have made laws and designed programmes in addition to establishing agencies and ministries to manage environmental matters. This is in realization of the fact that if preventive measures were not taken, environmental problems could affect the people adversely by making them to be poor.

The intent of this paper is to unmask how man's activities on the environment can engender poverty, and analyze government's efforts towards environmental control and management. It concludes by suggesting ways/measures to reduce environmental problems. The paper is divided into several parts with the first part on what the environment means. The second dwells on the term poverty. The third is on man's activities on the environment that result to poverty and government's efforts to control and manage environmental problems. Finally, it discusses the ways of achieving environmental sustainability.

### **What is an Environment**

Though, opinions are diverse on what this concept means, it simple means everything that makes up our surroundings and affects our ability to live on earth, the air we breathe, the water that covers most of the earth's surface, the plants and animals around us, and much more.

The Encyclopaedia dictionary defined the environment as all the physical, social, and cultural factors and conditions influencing the existence or development of an organism or assemblage of organisms. According to Aina (1991), the word environment has been defined as the total outer physical and biological system in which man and other organisms live. The environment consists of the biotic and the abiotic components. The former are the living organisms, while the latter consist of the non-living physical elements.

Similarly, the environment has been conceived as a system where living organisms interact with the physical elements. This system is alternatively known as the ecosystem. In this view, man as part of the living organisms interacts with the environmental set up (Jimoh, 2000). The entire environment can be classified under two broad headings as the natural and cultural environments. Within these environmental spheres are a number of interactions that propel the different types of human related activities. As a result, interactions easily translate into different environmentally related problems, which impact on man (Jeje and Adesina, 1996).

### **The Term Poverty**

Poverty is the condition of lacking full economic access to fundamental human needs such as food, shelter and safe drinking water. While some define poverty primarily in economic terms, others consider social and political arrangements to be intrinsic. Although, poverty is generally considered to be undesirable, because of the pain and suffering that accompany it, in certain spiritual contexts, it may be seen as a virtue because voluntary poverty involves the renunciation of material goods. The Encyclopaedia dictionary defines poverty as the condition of being poor with respect to money, goods, or means of subsistence, indigence, deficiency or lacking of something specified as poverty of ideas, deficiency of desirable ingredients or qualities. According to Okoro (2007), poverty could be described as inadequate income of a household as judged by specific standard. When a household's

standard of living is below their comfort aspiration consequent upon income then poverty becomes the order of the day.

In the Nigerian context, the National Bureau of Statistics (2010) defines poverty from the point of view that anyone who spends less than N65 a day is regarded as poor. While the United Nations definition says poverty is the inability to spend less than \$1 a day equivalent to N150 (Magnus, 2010). This is regarded as absolute poverty living in less than \$1 a day and not being able to have the basic necessities for survival.

World Bank Organization (2010) describes Poverty in this way:

Poverty is hunger. Poverty is lack of shelter. Poverty is being sick and not being able to see a Doctor. Poverty is not having access to school and not knowing how to read. Poverty is not having a job, is fear for the future, living one day at a time. Poverty has many faces, changing from place to place and across time, and has been described in many ways. Most often, poverty is a situation people want to escape. So poverty is a call to action for the poor and the wealthy alike, a call to change the world so that many more may have enough to eat, adequate shelter, access to education and health, protection from violence, and a voice in what happens in their communities.

### **Man's Activities on the Environment that Result to Poverty and Government's Efforts to Control and Manage the Environment**

Oil was discovered at Oloibiri, in the present Bayelsa State in 1956 and subsequently exploration and exploitation activities began in 1958. Consequently, oil companies, local and foreign, such as Shell BP, Chevron, Elf, Agip, Mobil, Total to mention but a few, were involved in both onshore and offshore drilling, exploration and production in the Niger Delta Region. However, apart from Bayelsa state, oil is also produced in other states of Nigeria as Cross River, Rivers, Akwa-Ibom, Imo, Ondo, Abia, Edo and Delta.

Thus, in order to administer and develop the country, the Nigerian state led by successive regimes (Military and Civilian) relied on the revenue generated from the sale of crude oil. This has culminated in the making of laws and policies as well as establishing ministries and agencies to regulate, guide and oversee the oil exploration activities and management of the environment in that region.

In fact, because of the importance of environment to man's existence on earth, the United Nations founded the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) following its conference on the human environment in June 1972 with its headquarters in Nairobi, Kenya. It also has six regional offices and various country offices. This agency is charged with the responsibility to coordinate the UN environmental activities, assisting developing countries in implementing environmentally sound policies and practices.

Moreover, the United Nations General Assembly slated June 5 every year to mark the world environment day, the date established in 1972 to stimulate awareness on the environment and to enhance political action. Since, the inception of this event, many conferences has been organized by this international organization and government of different countries to appreciate the essence of environmental protection, control, management and sustainability for the benefit of the people.

Also, the Brundtland Commission, formally the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), known by the name of its chair Gro Harlem Brundtland, was

convened by the United Nations in 1983. The commission was created to address growing concern about the accelerating deterioration of the human environment and natural resources and the consequences of that deterioration for economic and social development. In establishing the commission, the UN General Assembly recognized that environmental problems were global in nature and determined that it was in the common interest of all nations to establish policies for sustainable development.

Again, in 1992, the world demonstrated its concern during the Earth Summit on the environment in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, over the need to protect the environment. The world body UN is not alone in this fight for the environment. Thus, individual countries and governments have also shown their concern in different ways.

In Nigeria, the Federal Environmental Protection Agency was established by Decree No.58 of 1988 charged with the mandate to develop plan of actions and advise government on natural environmental policies and priorities. There were also decrees promulgated by successive military regimes on environmental control and sustainability.

These included the Land Use Act 1978; FEPA, Cap. 133 of 1988 as amended in 1992, Endangered Species Act; Cap 108 of 1990 Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Decree No 18/86, 1992, etc. These legislations now earn their validity as 'existing laws' by the provision of section 315(1) of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (Uwais, 2002).

In 1987, under the regime of Major General Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida, the federal government established the Oil Minerals Producing Development Commission (OMPADEC) with offices in all the Niger Delta states. It was charged with the responsibility of coordinating and ensuring infrastructural development of Niger Delta region.

Unlike in the 1979 constitution where the word 'environment' did not feature at all, the 1999 constitution made specific reference to the environment in section 20 which states that: 'the state shall protect and improve the environment and safeguard the water, air and land, forest and wildlife of Nigeria'. However, there is no specific item on protection of the environment under both the exclusive and concurrent legislative lists in the 1999 constitution, though items akin to environment exist under both lists (Uwais, 2002).

The Federal Government under President Olusegun Obasanjo, in her renewed commitment to environmental control and management in the Niger Delta region established the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) as a replacement of the OMPADEC earlier set up in 1987 with the same mandate. Again, the Federal government under late President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua created the ministry of Niger Delta in 2007 to oversee the issues of environment and infrastructural development in that region. Apart from setting up agencies and ministries, government also paid 13% derivative funds to the affected states in the Niger Delta region for developmental purposes and to cushion the effect of oil exploration and exploitation activities and to stem the rising poverty among the Niger Delta people.

To the foregoing analysis, the existing environmental laws in Nigeria cover specific subject areas and they include the following:

1. Environmental Protection
2. Natural Resources
3. Hazardous Substances

4. Nature and Biodiversity
5. Land Use
6. Cultural Resources
7. Hydrology

In addition to these environmental laws, Nigeria is a signatory to many international conventions and treaties related to environmental matters. However, despite government's efforts at environmental control, management and sustainability, man's activities on the environment have engendered poverty in the Niger Delta Region.

Some of the ways in which man's activities on environment have engendered poverty are:

**(a.) Gas Flaring**

This is a process of burning off surplus combustible vapour from a well, either as a means of disposal or as a safety measure to relieve well pressure, and it is the most significant source of air emissions from offshore oil and gas installations. Against this backdrop, the Global Gas Flaring Reduction Initiative convened its first International Conference in Oslo, Norway from April 15 to 16, 2002. The initiative was led by the World Bank Group in collaboration with the Government of Norway. It was launched in Marakech, Morocco in November, 2001 with the aim of supporting national governments and the petroleum industry in their efforts to reduce the flaring and venting of gas associated with the extraction of crude oil (McCormick, 2001).

**(b.) Oil Spillage**

Oil Spills are natural consequences of petroleum exploration and generally speaking unavoidable. The production and transportation of oil involve many mechanical processes, the continuous efficiency of which may be hard to guarantee. Invariably, a spillage results because of faults at any stage of production and transportation of oil. Thus, oil spillage can have a significant impact on marine larvae, birds and mammals in particular, and to a lesser extent on fish.

**(c.) Environmental Degradation**

This is the deterioration of the environment through depletion of resources such as air, water, and soil, the extinction of ecosystems and the extinction of wildlife. An unrestrained human activity all over the world has contributed to environmental destruction and ecological crisis. The activities themselves are not bad; they are bound to occur if there must be development and progress (Omisore and Abegnude, 2002).

Environmental degradation is one of the ten threats officially cautioned by the High Level Threat Panel of the United Nations. Thus, the World Resources Institute (WRI), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Bank have made public an important statement worldwide on May 1, 1998 about environmental management and sustainability (UNEP 1990).

**(d.) Desertification**

This is one of the greatest environmental challenges today and a major barrier to meeting basic human needs in dry lands. In dry land, more people depend on ecosystem. Indeed, many of their resources such as crops, livestock, fuel wood and construction materials depend on growth of plants which depends on water availability and climatic conditions. In fact, fluctuations in the services supplied by ecosystems are normal especially in dry lands, where water supply is irregular and scarce. However, when a dry land ecosystem is no longer capable to recover from previous pressures, a downward spiral of desertification may follow. Yet it is not inevitable. UNEP (1990) described desertification as land degradation in arid, semi arid and dry sub-humid areas, resulting mainly from adverse human impact.

Indeed, policies that can lead to an unsustainable use of resources and lack of infrastructures are major contributors to land degradation. Besides, agriculture can play either a positive or a negative role, depending on how it is managed. Again policies favoring sedentary farming over nomadic herding in regions more suited for grazing can contribute to desertification.

**(e.) Pollution**

According to the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, pollution is the process of making air, water, soil, etc dirty. Thus, air pollution occurs when certain materials are present in an environment at a concentration that is sufficient to have a physiological effect on the organisms. Air pollution can be indoor or outdoor. On the other hand, water pollution has a large set of adverse effects upon water bodies such as lakes, rivers, oceans and groundwater caused by human activities. Although, natural phenomena such as volcanoes, algae, blooms, storms, and earthquakes also cause major changes in water quality and the ecological status of water. Water is only called polluted when it is not able to be used for what one wants it to be used for.

**Ways of Environmental Management Control and Sustainability**

Apparently, environmental activities have contributed to the poverty of people, but how can we manage and control these problems. A number of factors are considered.

In the first place, government needs to put in place policy and regulatory frameworks for the control and management of environmental problems for sustainable growth and development. She needs to be proactive with its measures of controlling environmental problems. Apart from budgeting money to solve environmental problems, its agencies should be seen to utilize the money effectively for the purpose it was earmarked and feed back process mechanism should be strengthened by legislation. The FEPA and OMPADEC established by the government should not only be adequately funded but also their activities should be properly monitored and coordinated to achieve the desired results.

Besides, each environmental problem has ways of preventing and controlling it. In the case of desertification, effective prevention of desertification requires management and policy approaches that promote sustainable resources use.

Prevention is preferable to rehabilitation, which is difficult and costly. Major policy intervention and changes in management approach, both at local and global levels, are needed in order to prevent, stop or reverse desertification. This will increase yield to government revenue. On oil spillage though, there could be clean up after an oil spill but it is ineffective

and so difficult and does not fully rehabilitate affected areas. Therefore prevention is most important. The effective prevention plans include:

- a. Improved piloting, training of ship and tanker crews.
- b. Training of storage and pipeline facility crews.
- c. Enforcing pollution rules at sea.
- d. Maintaining vessels and pipelines.
- e. Building more resistant vessels.

On degradation, public enlightenment campaign on the felling of trees should be intensified on the need to plant two trees or more where one is removed. On pollution, the solution includes assessment, prevention and adequate ventilation. On the other hand, water pollution should have a refuse act of the National Parliament that prohibits the disposal of any refuse matter into either the nations navigable rivers, lakes, streams and other navigable bodies of water, or any tributary to such water, unless one has first obtained a permit.

People in the Niger Delta Region should change their attitude towards the use of their environment by adopting the culture of environmental protection and preservation. In the same vein, the Oil Companies operating in these communities should maintain international best practices. This way they can contribute their own quota towards environmental management and sustainability.

Finally, government should create an enabling environment by making policies and laws that can create wealth and reduce poverty among her people.

### **Summary**

This study shows that the environment is everything that makes up our surroundings and affects our ability to live on earth, the air we breath, the water that cover most of the earth's surface, the plants and animals around us and much more. On the other hand, poverty could be described as inadequate income of a household as judged by specific standard.

Man's activities on the environment and consequent government's inability to control and manage it has culminated into poverty in the Niger Delta Region. Some of the ways through which man's activities have caused poverty in the Niger Delta region especially include desertification, degradation, gas flaring, oil spillage, pollution (air, soil and water).

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, despite government's efforts at controlling and managing the environment by making laws, policies and establishing agencies and ministries for the Niger Delta Region, the consequent environmental problems have made the people to be poor.

### **Recommendation**

In view of the analysis in this study, we make the following recommendations. In the first place, government should be proactive with its policies and programmes. Besides, the attitude of people in the Niger Delta Region towards the environment should change for good. Finally, the environmental problems that cause poverty as aforementioned can also be solved.

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