

# EXTERNALLY REGULATED ENVIRONMENT: ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE NIGER DELTA PEOPLE

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## Abstract

*Every society is closely and inextricably linked to the natural environment that supports its members. The productive as well as social activities of its inhabitants are consequently shaped to a significant degree, by the available natural resources that characterized the environment. In as much as the environment offers them various opportunities to choose from, they also make frantic efforts to regulate the environment in such a way that the resources therein can sustain the present and future generations. The internally regulated environment is not alien to the Niger Delta people. As part of their traditional practice, they make various rules that regulate how the resources should be exploited and even venerate the environment. Thus they exploited their resources in line with the dictates of existential requirements. These traditional practices suddenly underwent alterations with the penetration of European merchants for petroleum resources in the Niger Delta region. With the aid of their Nigerian collaborators, the Niger Delta environment became subjected to external regulations. A scenario that gave way to ordinate and reckless exploitation at a pace that the inhabitants find difficult to grapple with. This paper charts a tour on the issue of external environmental regulation and its implications for the traditional environment and the inhabitants of the Niger Delta.*

## Introduction

Man's interaction with his environment and the resources therein dates back to when he began to feel economic needs. Khoshoo (1990), maintains that the urge to satisfy these economic needs ushered in systematic exploitation and modification of his environment. He further argues that man-environment interaction is divided into three epochs. These epochs range from hunting and gathering, domestication of animals and plants to the application of science and technology to the exploitation process.

It is fundamental to note that each epoch witnessed man's romance with his environment through exploitation of natural resources. However, the resources to be exploited from the environment are strongly determined by his present economic needs and the level of technical skills he knows how. In other words, man's economic needs and technical skills determine what is useful. Thus there was a strong link between his cultural appraisal and decision of what constitutes a natural resource (Dorfman, 1985, Ecklohm, 1991). Jike (2004), illustratively stress that obsidian was just a glassy volcanic rock until prehistoric man discovered its value as a cutting

tool as a result of the economic need and his technical skills.

The inhabitants of the Niger Delta region like their counterparts in other regions of the world perceived the environment as an inseparable pillar of their existential base. Little wonder then that Akinjide (2000) refers to the environment as a vital patrimony for mankind. Right from inception, there exists a robust interaction between the inhabitants of the Niger Delta and their environment. An interaction that is necessitated by the economic as well as the social needs of the people. Thus, the focal point of man-environment interaction is the natural resources that characterized the environment.

The economic activities of the inhabitants are anchored on environmental determinism. In other words, the available resources, their present needs and the technology at hand obviously influence their occupational activities. The need to meet their economic needs compelled them to make deliberate moves to modify their environment according to the dictates of basic requirements of existence.

It should be noted however, that exploitation was done initially by the indigenous inhabitants and only agricultural and related resources were exploited. The exploitation of these resources was not only according to their needs and at their own pace but also there were measures put in place to regulate the exploitation. The whole essence of this internal regulation was to ensure that the resources are not over exploited. The people of the Niger Delta believe that if the environment is not regulated, the resources therein will not be protected and preserved. When this happens the future generations will have an environment that lacks carrying capacity to sustain its inhabitants.

This prevailing order of an internally or indigenously regulated environment was supplanted by external environmental regulation which was occasioned by the discovery of crude oil in the Niger Delta region. This alteration of the status quo has grave implications for the traditional environment and the inhabitants of the Niger Delta.

This paper therefore presents a cardinal contribution to contending issues associated with external regulation of the Niger Delta environment. In order to achieve this, the paper explores a brief overview of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, indigenous exploitation of resources and environmental regulations, external exploitation of resources and regulation of environment, the

social cost of externally regulated environment on the inhabitants and conclusion on remediation measures.

### **The Niger Delta Region of Nigeria**

The Niger Delta is a vast expanse of land mass in the south of Nigeria which extends eastward of longitude 4.30°E to the Nigeria-Cameroun border and bounded by the Atlantic Ocean. It lies within some 22 estuaries that are linked locally by a complicated network of mangrove creeks rich in wetland biodiversity among others. The region is also characterized by an immense complexity of many swamps, creeks, rivers and estuaries possessed of seasonal inundation during flood periods.

The region is one of the largest wet land in the world covering an area of nearly 26,000km<sup>2</sup> with various ecological zones, lowland, rainforest, fresh water, mangrove forest and sand coastal barriers. These ecozones cut across a heterogeneous, multi ethnically diverse states namely: Abia, Akwa-Ihoni, Bavela, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo and Rivers (Durotoye, 2000).

Niger Delta region is characterized by occupational distributions which are mainly farming, fishing, traditional mangrove exploitation, raffia/oil palm exploitation, port and associated activities. This occupation distribution is dictated by the ecozones in the region. See table.

<b>ECOZONE</b>	<b>APPROX. AREA</b>	<b>MAJOR ACTIVITIES</b>
Low land equatorial moozon	7400km <sup>2</sup>	Oil extraction & infrastructure. Ariable agriculture oil plam and rubber urban and industrial
Fresh water	11700km <sup>2</sup>	Oil extraction & infrastructure traditional forest exploitation modern forestry raffia and oil palm fishing
Brackish water	5400km <sup>2</sup>	Oil extraction and infrastructure traditional mangrove exploitation port and associated activities
Sand barrier island	1140km <sup>2</sup>	Oil extraction and major infrastructure fishing raffia and oil palm exploitation
<b>Total</b>	<b>25640km<sup>2</sup></b>	

*Niger Delta Ecozones and major economic activities*

From the Fable above, the Delta region has four ecozones. These ecozones dictate the settlement pattern and economic activities there in. It should be noted that hydro-carbons are abundantly evident in all the ecozones hence oil extraction is the only economic activity that cut across all the ecozones in the region. This explains why the contributions of the Niger Delta region in terms of oil and gas to the Nigerian state cannot be overemphasized. Presently, this richly endowed region contributes almost 90% of Nigerian annual income through exploitation of crude oil and gas.

The ecozone also reveals that the region has more water than land. The network of rivers flowing over an expansive flat terrain in Niger Delta makes the region vulnerable to flooding. As a result of this, the region is characterized principally by sparsely populated rural settlements occupying isolated dry sites within the swamps. Large settlements are found in areas where drainage condition and accessibility are better of:

The inhabitants of the Niger Delta acknowledge these harsh physical conditions in their environment and make every effort to traditionally regulate their environment in order to ensure conservation of resources for the present and future generations.

### **Indigenous Exploitation of Resources and Environmental Regulations**

The exploitation of resources is anchored on environmental determinism. The available resources, the present needs and the level of technology determine the pattern of exploitation and influence occupational activities of a people. The ecological zonation of the Niger Delta region reveals that more water than land characterized the region. This is why occupational activities within the region vary significantly from one region to the other. Those that settle in a particular zone engage in occupational activities that are favoured by the environment. This is why those who settle in the relatively up land zones take to farming, hunting, palm produce etc. as their occupational activities since that is what their environment permits. While those who settle along the

coastal areas engage in fishing and preparation of local gin popularly known as *ogogoro*.

The pattern of exploitation of resource among the inhabitants is in two categories. They exploit resources from both land and river. However, although, ecological zone determines the resources to be exploited most people in the region exploit from both land and water, with one complementing the other. This explains why the Urhobo and Isoko speaking people of the Niger Delta have farming as their major economic activity and also engage in small scale fishing to complement the farm produce. Among the Ijaw speaking people, it is the reverse; fishing is the major occupational activity while small scale farming is practiced as a complementary occupation.

As part of their environmental regulatory practices, the inhabitants of the Niger-Delta make sure that their appetite does not pose danger to the resource in their environment. Those who exploit land resources make frantic efforts towards the protection and preservation of the resources. The land and the resources therein is not just out there to be bruised and pillaged in order to satisfy the appetite and basic instincts of the inhabitants. As Jike and Ogege (2005). Rightly noted. at interval of three or more harvest, the land just like a human being must be allowed to fallow, so as to rejuvenate lost nutrients before being put back to optimal use.

While clearing virgin forest for farming purposes, valuable economic or forest resources such as palm trees, Iroko tree, etc are not tampered with. They are protected and preserved till when they are due for periodic harvest in case of palm trees. The trees are only cut down when they are deemed matured for building canoes and the likes. During hunting expedition, hunters refrain from killing young animals and animals that are undergoing parturition as games. In most communities, hunters are restricted from hunting in certain areas. The essence is for preservation of some species of animals.

The inhabitants equally extended this regulation of the environment to the water resource. For instance, in some community's lakes for fishing are left fallow for years before they are harvested. Like in the case of bush fallow, the river or 'water fallow' is to allow the fishes to reproduce extensively. During harvest, fishing equipment's to be used and the pattern of harvest is specified. For instance, people are not allowed to use fishing nets that are met for fingerlings or young fishes. Also, they are not allowed to use chemical such as Gammalin 20 and dynamites etc. for harvest. The use of chemicals and explosives will not only kill all sizes and species of fish, its pollutant effect will make the water inhabitable for fishes and other water creature and pantheon of water spirits. Violation of these environmental regulatory norms attracts severe negative sanctions. The sanctions range from fine, ex-communication to ostracism.

The indigenous environmental regulation is integrated into their belief system and religious lives. The lakes and rivers are venerated. This is anchored on the widespread belief that the rivers and lakes are inhabited by deities who influence and protect fishes and even achievement of the inhabitants. In some communities in the Niger Delta, certain lakes and streams are left for decades without harvest in line with the dictates of the deities. Such harvest often takes the form of festival in honour of a deity or deities. While the fishing is on, chiefs and older men dressed gorgeously in festive mood in the bank of the lake dancing and drinking.

In several communities in the Niger Delta, some trees are venerated and worshipped. There also exist 'invisible' religious bond entered into which prevent members of these communities from killing and eating some species of animal. For instance, some communities in Delta State such as Usieffrun people do kill or eat python. Abbe people do not eat monkey. Abraka people don't eat squirrel, the Orogun don't eat Iguana, some communities in Isoko don't eat snail. The list cannot be exhausted as one animal or the other is

forbidden in virtually every community and is regarded as sacred.

These bonds, though have spiritual undertones, they stand out as ways of regulating the environment. These religious actions have a way of preserving these species of animal that would have been endangered, if not for the religious restrictions. Thus, the forbidden species of animal are found in abundance in these communities and this in a way is cultural preservation of these animals from extinction.

### **External Exploitation of Resources and Environmental Regulations**

As it was earlier emphasised, the inhabitants of Niger Delta have interaction with their environment due to felt economic needs. They exploit the resources in their environment according to the dictates of basic requirements of existence.

However, the' exploited these resources with caution as there were guide lines and restrictions regarding the mode and pattern of exploitation. These restrictions perhaps, constitute the indigenous environmental regulatory' measures that were prevalent among the various communities in the Niger Delta.

These traditional practices relating to regulation of the environment witnessed a tremendous alteration with the penetration of the European explorers anti merchants in the Niger Delta regions. The exploitation of agricultural resources became expanded. In addition to the exploitation of palm products, rubber was introduced as a result of the need for raw material in their home country. Supporting this line of argument, Eno (1974), stressed that the drive to intensify the production and exploitation of agricultural resources was necessitated by the industrial revolution in Britain, the introduction of railway which require palm oil as lubricant, and the need to manufacture items such as soap, margarines, candles etc. which are shipped to the people as finished products.

As part of the strategies to intensify production and eventual exploitation of agricultural resources,

the European government introduce plantain scheme, pioneered oil mill and rubber estates. The plantation scheme, oil mills and rubber estates were experimented in Urhobo and Isoko lands of Delta State (Udo, 1967). The implication of the intensified exploitation is that the indigenous environmental regulatory measures of land tenure system, bush fallow etc. were undermined as acres of virgin forest were cut down in communities where plantation scheme and rubber estates were established. Also, the desire to meet the new wants or finished products compelled the indigenous people to exert more than usual effort required in their traditional economy to provide for their basic needs and that of their families.

Acquisition of land for expanded agricultural resources created very minimal alteration in the regulation of the environment in the Niger Delta. The reasons for this are because it was established in a few communities that have abundant land for farming. Secondly, the inhabitants had relative benefits from these schemes. Things assume a different shape when the prospecting for fossil fuel commenced in the Niger Delta. The discovery of crude oil in commercial quantities first in Oloibiri, in present day Bavela State and in other states of the Niger Delta marked the inception of external environmental regulations.

The multinational oil companies search for regions of maximum opportunity (Gallagher and Robinson, 1953) and the Niger Delta region approximate the region of maximum opportunity, the capitalists had in mind. However, maximum opportunity depends largely upon political consideration of security and a firm grip and control of the environment of the region. This determinant is aptly presented by O'Connor (1971). In his words:

*... The precondition for a truly favourable investment climate is indirect or direct control of internal politics in the backward regions. Economic penetration therefore leads to the establishment for sphere of influence ... pg. 32.*

In order to perfect this strategy, the imperialists or capitalists resorted to the substitution of internal colonialism or what Green and Sideman in Offing (1980), referred to as decolonization. Under this arrangement, power is now transferred to the domestic ruling classes. In other words, puppets governments represented by stooges, compradors or corrupted civil or military functionaries are put in place to run the affairs of the state or region.

This crop of domestic ruling classes otherwise known as local marionettes or what the French called 'interlocutors variables' make sure that the investors' boat is not rocked (Hall, 1972). In the case of the Nigerian state, reactionary elements, anti-popular politicians, corrupt civil or military elites are made to emerge as leaders. These crop of leaders already have interest in the control of oil revenue and also focused their attention on the oil rich Niger Delta. This is in line with Nannen's observation that *no one in power in Abuja ever want to lose control of the Niger Delta and its oil and gas resources* (Nannen 2004).

As part of providing an enabling environment or favourable investment climate for the investors, the Nigerian collaborators issued licenses and enact laws and decree that are in absolute disregard to the internal indigenous environmental regulations of the inhabitants of the Niger Delta region. There are several strategies, put in place. The Nigerian state gave concessionary rights to oil companies. The concessionary right as contained in the Mineral Ordinance of 1925 enables companies registered in Britain or its protectorates to prospect for oil in every part of Niger Delta in Nigeria. (Etikerentse, 1988, Shyllon 1989, Eromcsele, 1997). This trend was intensified after independence as oil multinational companies outside Britain were issued licences to prospect for oil hydrocarbon accumulation in the Niger Delta region. Another strategy worth mentioning is the obnoxious and repressive Land Use Decree that was enacted by the then Head of State, Gen. Olusegun Obasanjo in 1978. The decree stipulated that the state and not individuals own land. According to Okaba. (2005). with this

draconian decree, the inhabitants of the oil bearing communities are systematically dispossessed of their rightful possession.

With these strategies in place, the traditional practices of regulating the mode and pattern of exploiting the resources in their environment are then relegated to the background. In its place, an external environmental regulatory measures designed by the foreign investors is implemented by the crop of domestic rulers or collaborators in the Nigerian state. With this, the oil multinationals are allowed to embark on plunderers and reckless exploitation of the resources in the Niger Delta environment. A trend that has been on for decades not minding the impact of their action on the traditional environment and inhabitants of the oil bearing communities of the Niger Delta.

### **The Social Implications of External Environmental Regulation**

The supplanting of the indigenous environmental regulation by external ones makes the Niger Delta region to be a region of maximum opportunity for the investors. This barrier free or free-for-all exploration and exploitation of oil resources in the Niger Delta attracted many oil companies and in the scramble, every part of the region that has oil accumulation was exploited with reckless abandon as they were only concerned about the profits accruable to them.

With this scenario, there became a sharp departure from the traditional environment that the inhabitants are used to. The once ever green forests, unpolluted waters and the fertile lands of the oil bearing communities of Niger Delta have become shadow of what it used to be prior to the mindless exploitation of oil in their region. A nostalgic picture of the traditional environment was given a poetic insight by Ojaide (1997):

*...The Urhurhu grapes were well coloured the cotton trees flourish ... tile environment was a home of salt and fish stilted in mangrove, always welcoming others, where host and guest flourished on palm oil yams and*

*garret and green was the lingua franca... with the man- made mounds in the environment, trees are now beheaded and the streams mortally poisoned. Tins inheritance now crushes my body and soul.*

The assertion above succinctly presents what the natural environment in its traditional stage was and the destructive effects unleashed on the present environment by the uninhibited exploratory activities of the multinational companies. Thus, there are forests with trees without leaves streams without fish and soil without nutrients. This is occasioned by the ancillary problem of pollution, spillage gas flaring etc. and have adverse effects on the environment and the broader concept of sustainable development (Akingbade 1991, Jike 2002, Okaba 2004).

With the plunder on the environment and its productive capacity affected, the traditional economy that is sustained mainly by farming and fishing disappeared. This dispossession inevitably shoved the inhabitants into the unemployment circle. This fined expression in widespread hardship, poverty, and other social vices in the Niger-Delta. As able bodied persons now embark on anything including crime and other anti-social acts in order to survive.

External environmental regulation damaged the cultural fabric of the oil bearing communities. The exploration caused unhindered influx of immigrants of varying categories to the oil bearing communities where company projects are carried out. This give rise to population explosion, squatter settlements, undue pressure on existing facilities, introduction of new lifestyles among others.

As the environment is externally regulated and its attendant pulls of immigrants, there is also a push influence on the indigenous population. As the exploration and exploitation is intensified, environmental degradation is equally intensified. It gets to a point where the adverse effects of

degradation will attain intolerable level. At this point, the inhabitants will be displaced from their traditional occupation that the traditional environment and ecozone offer them. As a rational response to this occupational displacement and their inability to adjust, they migrate to nearby urban centres in search of greener pasture. Okaba (1996) Wilven (1999) lend credence to this argument.

Another fundamental social cost of externally regulated environment in the Niger Delta is that the incursion of oil multinational companies strain inters group relations. Mutual distrust and rivalry became escalated. Thus, families and communities that have been co-existing without conflict now engage in warfare induced by the external factor in their midst. These violent clashes usually over oil bearing spaces as Ogege (2002) rightly noted, have sent many to untimely grave amidst wanton destruction of properties. A gruesome incident in this direction is that of Ewreni an oil bearing community in Delta State of Nigeria. That clash of January 20, 2000. Left their monarch, His Royal Highness Owin Kumane Eruwede II and many others dead (Chido, 2000).

The external regulation of the Niger Delta induce poverty on one hand and also negatively influence the youths into the 'get-rich-quick syndrome' Beside the degradation of environment and the occupational displacement mentioned earlier, they are no longer interested in any endeavour that takes month to yield dividends. They only go for things that yield huge amount of money within a short time. Thus, they are now pushed into all sorts of socially unacceptable behaviours in order for them to actualize their goal of instant wealth.

### **Conclusion**

The indigenous environmental regulation that was replaced by external regulations is highly inimical to the oil bearing communities of the Niger Delta. Rather than regulate the mode and pattern of exploitation, it is imposed on them by the leaders of the Nigerian state. These external regulatory measures are profit driven and as such lack consideration of the plight of the inhabitants. What is obtainable presently is that the oil companies in connivance with the Nigerian compradors operate as if the environment is irrelevant to the existence of the people in the Niger Delta region. Based on this

premise, basic oil exploration standards and corporate social responsibility are grossly compromised. As oil companies dictate the regulation that will enable them amass huge profit and remain in business at the expense of the inhabitants.

The social cost incurred by the inhabitants is not only the damage of their environment through spillage and gas flaring. It also triggers off unemployment, poverty, antisocial behaviour and a total breakdown in social bonds among individuals, communities and ethnic groups. In other words, the entire social structure is negatively affected.

As a first remediation measure, the Niger Delta environment should be deregulated. All forms of external regulation should be abrogated so as to give the inhabitants the opportunity to regulate their environment. This is against the backdrop that there is currently a growing realization that an externally regulated environment and mindless exploitation of resource is a threat to their collective existence. If this is done, the inhabitants who suffer the negative impact while the exploration last will embark on measures that will restore the gamut of despoliation across the oil bearing communities. If this is in place, the people should be able to decide who come into their environment and also dictate the pace and conditions of exploitation that can guarantee the survival and wellbeing of the inhabitants. If the Niger Delta environment is deregulated and given to the inhabitants to regulate, their helplessness and hopelessness will be a thing of the past.

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