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## **SOCIAL STRUGGLE AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE THE NIGER DELTA EXPERIENCE**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper reviewed critical issues related to social struggle and environmental justice in the Niger Delta region. It explored aspects of marginalization, deprivation, and the apparent exclusion of the people of the Niger Delta in matters of resource allocation and socio-political participation. The study highlighted the dangers posed by oil spills resulting from the activities of multinational oil companies. It also exposed the extent of neglect suffered by oil-producing states and communities at the hands of both the multinational firms and the central government. Among the recommendations made, the paper emphasized the need for environmental awareness education to sensitize communities about environmental challenges and to promote the protection of the Niger Delta and other oil-producing regions.*

**Key words:** Social Struggle; Environmental Justice; Niger Delta and Experience

## **Introduction**

One of the fundamental assets that sustain human existence is the environment. It is often the quality of the environment that determines the level of societal development. The human environment includes, but is not limited to, vegetation, landscapes, reliefs, oceans, seas, streams, and a variety of natural resources—both solid and liquid minerals—bestowed as free gifts by nature. Man's interaction with his environment has significant implications for his wellbeing, as well as for the sustainability of that environment.

A critical question arises: is it possible for a people to possess abundant natural resources and yet remain in poverty, without engaging in conflict? History and present realities suggest that some communities are richly endowed by nature, yet are dispossessed of these resources by individuals or groups with selfish interests. The experience of the Niger Delta people in Nigeria exemplifies this harsh reality.

Environmentalism, according to Guha and Martinez-Alier (1997), is a social movement aimed at protecting natural environments from abuse, decay, or outright destruction by human activity. This movement highlights the struggles faced by the poor who often suffer the consequences of environmental degradation caused by the upper social classes. In essence, environmentalism aligns with prosperity because it seeks to bring about positive transformation, particularly for impoverished communities.

The Green Party in Germany is an example of an environmentally-oriented movement that championed responsible use of the environment. However, it was often misinterpreted as a group opposing industrialization.

## **Theoretical Perspectives on Environmental Issues**

From a **Conflict Theory** perspective, Karl Marx's ideas offer strong justification for the rise of environmental movements. Environmental advocacy emerged largely from the persistent conflicts between the upper and lower classes over resource control. According to Guha and Martinez-Alier (1997), environmental destruction is often carried out by elites for economic

gain, at the expense of the common people. The oppressed lower class, therefore, seeks to reclaim and protect their environment, giving rise to environmentalist movements.

**Elite Theory** reinforces this dichotomy by positing that society is structured into two main groups: a powerful minority (bourgeoisie or elite) and a weaker majority (proletariat or working poor). The elites, due to their organizational strength, dominate economic, political, and social structures, often using the environment for their benefit while disregarding the rights and needs of the poor. This imbalance inevitably leads to conflict.

From the **Functionalist** perspective, the environment is an indispensable part of society. Functionalists argue that even conflict can bring about positive social change by transforming interactions, behaviors, and institutions. For instance, environmental degradation caused by the elite often sparks resistance from the lower class, which may lead to systemic reforms and increased environmental consciousness (Durkheim, 1982; Redclift & Benton, 1997).

### **Conflict in the Niger Delta**

According to Obi (2008), conflict has become endemic in the Niger Delta region. Attacks on oil installations, kidnappings of foreign nationals, and confrontations with security forces have become commonplace. These actions are targeted at oil companies and government institutions perceived to be complicit in the exploitation and marginalization of the region.

The activities of Niger Delta agitators have significantly disrupted oil production. For example, the daily production rate once estimated at 2.46 million barrels declined drastically (Iannacone, 2007), affecting Nigeria's standing as Africa's leading oil producer and a major supplier to Western countries. Despite the immense wealth generated from oil, the Niger Delta remains impoverished, with minimal development to show for its contributions.

The escalation of violence has had both local and international implications. According to Sahara Reporters (2007), a substantial percentage of oil exports have been disrupted due to militant activities. Clashes between Nigerian military forces and armed militants have intensified, rooted in long-standing grievances over exploitation and neglect.

Historically, Isaac Adaka Boro's 1966 uprising marked the beginning of organized militancy in the region. Boro, an Ijaw nationalist, formed the Niger Delta Volunteer Force (NDVF) to demand resource control. Subsequent groups such as the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) and the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC) have continued the agitation, sometimes resulting in violent reprisals like the military invasion of Odi in the 1990s (Human Rights Watch, 2002).

The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), under the leadership of Mujaheed Asari Dokubo, has gained international attention for its disruption of oil exports and aggressive resistance to government and corporate interests. The 1978 Land Use Decree, which transferred land ownership from communities to state governments, has exacerbated tensions by stripping locals of control over their ancestral lands (Omeje, 2005).

### **International and Domestic Impacts of the Niger Delta Conflict**

The conflict has taken an international dimension due to the kidnapping of foreign oil workers—over 100 reported between 2006 and the present (International Crisis Group, 2006). The proliferation of arms, including AK-47s, remote-detonation devices, night-vision equipment, and anti-aircraft missiles, has escalated the violence (Iannacone, 2007).

Militant groups in the Niger Delta are reportedly composed of approximately 10,000 fighters with access to over 25,000 weapons. Their activities are driven by the desire for control over oil wealth, and their operations are increasingly sophisticated and militarized.

Obi (2008) identifies several root causes of the conflict: oil pollution, extreme poverty, high youth unemployment, discriminatory employment practices, and political marginalization. While oil itself may not be the direct cause of violence, the government's and multinational corporations' attitudes toward its extraction and distribution are central to the conflict.

MEND's spokesperson, Jomo Gbomo, emphasized this in a statement: *"We are asking for justice; we want our land and the Nigerian government to transfer all its involvement in the oil industry to host communities."* Similarly, Ateke Tom declared himself a *"Niger Delta Freedom*

*Fighter"* (Simmons, 2007), reflecting the militants' framing of their struggle as a quest for justice and liberation.

### **Social Struggle and Environmental Injustice**

According to Karl Marx, as cited by Schaefer (2006:12), **social struggle** refers to agitation within societies, usually centered around the denial or exploitation of the masses. Feuer (1989:7, 41) further supports this view by asserting that the history of human societies has often been associated with **class struggle**. As long as human beings live in societies where inequalities exist—whether caused by natural forces or deliberate actions by dominant groups—there will always be agitation, struggle, or outright conflict.

In the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, these struggles have manifested in conflicts directly linked to environmental issues. The environmental challenges faced by the people of this region are largely the result of oil exploration and exploitation, which has led to widespread ecological degradation. As Peter, Ekpoh, and Bisong (1995) observe, overexploitation of natural resources often leads to ecological crises.

### **Environmental Challenges in the Niger Delta**

The environmental problems in the Niger Delta are both **primary and secondary**, arising from the continuous abuse and misuse of the environment. According to Williams (1991), these issues contribute to underdevelopment and poverty, forcing people to drink contaminated water and dispose of waste in hazardous ways. Industrial activities across the globe—whether in developed, developing, or underdeveloped nations—expose the environment to severe threats.

For example, the 1975 **Love Canal** disaster near Niagara Falls in New York showed the severe hazards of chemical contamination (Schaefer, 2006:379). Similarly, in 1986, the **Chernobyl nuclear explosion** in Ukraine killed over 32,000 people. In Nigeria, the **Ikeja Military Cantonment explosion** on January 27, 2002, claimed over a thousand lives. Another disaster occurred in 2006 with a **pipeline explosion in Abule-Egba**, Lagos, which killed hundreds.

In the Niger Delta, **oil spills** are frequent, causing water pollution, destruction of farmland, and the death of animals (Uduak, 2008). Scherbark (1996) categorizes environmental problems into three major spheres: **air pollution, water pollution, and land contamination**. The rate of air pollution is particularly high in urban areas due to industrialization and automobile usage.

City dwellers have come to accept **polluted air and smog** as a part of daily life (Schaefer, 2006:379). According to Carty (1999) and the World Resources Institute (1998), the **World Health Organization** estimates that approximately **700,000 premature deaths per year** could be avoided if air pollution were reduced.

The **dumping of domestic and industrial waste** into water bodies renders them unsafe for human consumption. Contaminated water is hazardous for drinking, fishing, and swimming, and poses significant health risks (United Nations, 2003). Ehrlich and Ehrlich (1999) attribute the growing environmental challenges to the **rapid increase in world population**, while Commoner (1990) argues that **technological innovation**, rather than population growth, is the root cause of environmental problems. Technological advancements such as **chemical fertilizers, herbicides, plastics, pesticides, and synthetic fibers** pose serious health and environmental risks.

### **Population Density in the Niger Delta**

According to the **Earth Rights Institute (2003)**, the **Niger Delta** has a population of over **20 million people**, based on data from the **2006 Census**, which recorded:

- Delta State: 2,570,181
- Rivers State: 3,983,857
- Bayelsa State: (additional figures not specified)

Obi (2000) notes that the **Ogoni** ethnic group alone, though relatively small, has an estimated population of **500,000** occupying 404 square miles. This suggests that the broader region likely has **over 10 million inhabitants** when all communities are considered.

Historically, the Niger Delta included areas like **Okrika, Ahoada, Degema, Opobo, Ogoni, Brass, Western Ijaw, and Warri**. Today, it is politically defined to include oil-producing states such as:

- Abia
- Imo
- Edo
- Delta
- Rivers
- Bayelsa
- Cross River
- Akwa Ibom
- Ondo

This definition aligns with both the **Niger Delta Environmental Survey (NDES, 1997)** and the **Oil Mineral Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC)**. Despite its large population, the Niger Delta lacks significant political influence, possibly explaining why its people resort to **violence and agitation** as a means to protest **resource marginalization** and **environmental degradation**.

### **Understanding Environmental Justice**

**Environmental justice** refers to a **legal and social framework** designed to protect communities—especially minorities—who are subjected to environmental hazards, often by powerful multinational corporations (Bullard, 1993). This concept emerged after repeated instances of industrial waste being dumped near **poor, politically powerless communities**.

Environmental justice includes legal mechanisms such as **filing civil rights lawsuits** through the **Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)** to prevent the construction of hazardous facilities. A notable example occurred in **1998**, when **Shintech Chemical Company** was denied permission to build in a **poor black community** in Mississippi (Associated Press, 1998).

In essence, environmental justice is a **legally accepted means of redress** for individuals or groups harmed by environmental mismanagement. According to Goldman (1998:140), environmental justice groups are "people involved or concerned with the restoration of the lost or degraded environment." These groups may focus on:

- Restoring creeks, farmlands, and farmers' markets
- Urban gardening projects
- Painting and beautifying neighborhoods
- Cleaning gutters and public areas

In the United States, organizations like the **San Francisco Bay Area People of Color Greening Network** and the **Los Angeles Clean-up Campaign** are examples. In Nigeria, groups such as **Friends of the Earth** and other local initiatives are working to reclaim and protect the environment. Some plant trees, while others work toward **wildlife conservation** or **waste management**.

#### **Origin of Environmental Injustice:**

- **Historical Background:** The Niger Delta region, comprising nine states in Nigeria, is home to over 20 million people and rich in oil and gas reserves. Despite being crucial for Nigeria's economy (around 90% of Nigeria's earnings come from oil), the region remains severely underdeveloped and suffers from environmental degradation.
- **Oil Exploration:** Oil exploration, initiated by Shell B.P. in 1958, has caused significant environmental damage, including oil spills, gas flaring, and acid rain, which directly harm local ecosystems and communities.
- **Environmental and Ecological Problems:** The pollution caused by oil extraction has led to destruction of farmland, loss of potable water, and increased health risks like respiratory diseases, cancers, and malnutrition. The local population, especially women, is severely impacted, unable to sustain their livelihoods due to the destruction of agricultural lands and aquatic life.

#### **Multinational Oil Companies' Role:**

- **Shell and Other Companies:** Multinational companies like Shell, ExxonMobil, and Chevron have contributed significantly to the environmental degradation of the Niger Delta. Despite guidelines set by the Nigerian government to limit such damage, these companies continue to operate with little regard for the environment or the health of local communities.
- **Neglect by the Government:** The Nigerian government, while benefiting from the oil revenue, has failed to address the plight of the Niger Delta people, further marginalizing the region both politically and economically.

### **Social Struggle and Injustice:**

- **Resistance and Militancy:** Faced with the environmental devastation and lack of support, Niger Delta youths, such as those from the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), have resorted to armed resistance. The political marginalization and environmental destruction have led to widespread unrest and demands for resource control.
- **Health Hazards:** The toxic effects of oil exploration, including acid rain, gas flaring, and oil spills, have resulted in respiratory problems, skin diseases, and even the loss of homes and agricultural lands. The local people face not only environmental but also social health crises.

### **Environmental Justice:**

- **Need for Legal Redress:** Environmental justice initiatives have emerged to fight back against the exploitation of the Niger Delta's resources. This includes efforts to hold multinational companies accountable for environmental damage through civil suits and international campaigns.
- **International Involvement:** Both the Nigerian government and foreign governments (whose companies operate in the region) must take action to curb the exploitation and degradation. Monitoring and enforcing environmental regulations is crucial to protect the communities affected by oil extraction.

### **Way Forward:**

To effectively address the environmental challenges in the Niger Delta, several measures are proposed:

1. **Environmental Awareness:** Educating both the public and multinational companies about the environmental impacts of oil exploration.
2. **Accountability:** Governments should enforce regulations requiring multinationals to compensate communities for the damages caused.
3. **Routine Inspections:** Regular monitoring by government agencies of the activities of multinational corporations in the region.
4. **Community Involvement:** Encouraging local communities to demand environmental justice and hold oil companies accountable.
5. **Corporate Social Responsibility:** Multinational companies should contribute to the development of the Niger Delta as part of their social responsibility.

### **Conclusion:**

The exploitation of the Niger Delta's resources has led to severe environmental degradation and social unrest. The region's people suffer due to the negligence of multinational corporations and the Nigerian government. However, by implementing measures to ensure environmental justice, there is hope for reducing the ecological damage and improving the quality of life for the local communities.

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