

The wretched of the Niger Delta



BY CHINEDUM UWAEBULAM

Christiana Akpode, 25, was radiating life, hope and ambition like many other young boys and girls of Jesse Clan, in the Ethiope Local Government Area of Delta State.

On 17 October 1998, however, everything she had held to, including her life, went up in flames. From there, she plodded the streets in Jesse with festering wounds, helpless and uncared for by society.

She became bedridden, with wounds from her mid-section to her legs. From the kneecaps to her feet, the skin tissue was badly damaged and dripped body fluid, which caused a horrible stench.

She was later discharged from Saint Francis Hospital, some 70km from Jesse, without any cure. In September 2000, the girl could not fight on; she died, along with her dreams and aspirations.

Christiana, like about a thousand other Jesse people, were victims of a burst pipeline fire disaster. The incident is a consequence of one of many oil spills in the Niger Delta region that have aroused peoples' feelings, causing unquantifiable losses and ecological devastation, destruction of marine life and socio-economic paralysis.

In a period of four years, from 1976 to 1980, about 800 incidents of oil spillage were reported, and from 1980 to 1999, about 2 000 incidents occurred. From 1990 to 1995 about 700 other cases of spillage were said to have occurred. In all, from 1976 to 1995, there were more than 3 500 incidents resulting in the discharge of more than two million barrels of crude oil onto and into the land, swamps and offshore environment.

Mineral exploitation has left devastating consequences not only in the Niger Delta but other parts of Nigeria, such as Jos, where tin and ore have been mined for years, and the coal mines of Enugu.

"But never have the problems associated with mineral exploitation assumed such proportions with dire consequences as in the Niger Delta," says Prof Akinjide Osuntokun, who teaches at the University of Ibadan, Oyo State.

Typical of the Nigerian government, no incident has come and gone in the Niger Delta without a lot of buck-passing. The communities and vandals are always the culprits, while the oil firms whose rusty pipes may have caused

the spill are spared, which places government in a better position to avoid making compensation.

The Niger Delta region, located in Southern Nigeria, covers nine states: Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Ondo, Imo and Rivers. The region is one of the largest wetlands in the world. It encompasses over 70 000km². The mangrove forest occupies 6 000km², the most extensive in West and Central Africa.

The Niger Delta has the high biodiversity characteristic of extensive swamp and forest areas, with many species of plants and animals. It is also the mainstay of the Nigerian economy, generating about 90% of foreign exchange earnings from petroleum products. Petroleum exploration and prospecting began in the region in 1958 and ever since, has assumed greater dimensions.

Unfortunately, the indigenous of the Niger Delta, whose land and sacrifices have produced the country's wealth, have progressively become more impoverished.

THE HUMAN FACTOR

Pollution has taken its toll on the air, soil and rivers. The inhabitants now constitute a clan of the "Wretched of the Earth".

The tribes of fishermen from riverine areas such as Abonema, Urhobo, Itsekiri, Ukwuani and Bonny are disappearing.

The people are counting their losses. As Ibiba Don-Pedro, from the Ijaw speaking area states: "In many homes in the oil producing Niger Delta, younger family members have never savoured the rich tastes of soups and stews made with the giant croakers, barracuda pikes and catfish. The good cooks among Ijaw speaking people know that something vital is lost when they prepare some traditional fish dishes without the particular fish that gives that fish its particular flavour and character."

She lamented further: "In times past, it was a thing of honour to be fisherfolk; cloth, sacks of money hidden in ancient metal boxes, treasures of coral beads, gold jewellery, George wrappers, princely walking sticks, and for the more affluent fisherman, half a dozen canoes tied up at the waterside, and a house or two in the village, were all prizes for a life of struggle. All that is gone. Today, to be described as a fisherman is to be given a tag of wretchedness."

Recently, water hyacinth has been added to

the list of the people's woes, colonising streams and rivers and causing navigational problems. The agony of the inhabitants is worsened by land pollution problems that have changed the character of the areas, causing the destruction of crops, farms, vegetation and wildlife.

"It also impairs human health," according to Prof Steve Okecha, of the Federal University of Technology, Owerri, Imo State. This has greatly affected their agricultural produce.

A study carried out in 1995 revealed that between 1992 and 1993, the total area under major food crop production in Bayelsa, Rivers and Delta State decreased by 41.7% and by 15% between 1992 and 1995. It is estimated that of the 2 185 000 hectares that is the land area of Rivers and Bayelsa states, about half, is swampy.

The Niger Delta region was rich in elephants and monkeys, which roamed around the towns in the late 1950s and 60s. These species have long disappeared from the area as a result of oil exploration, gas production and poaching. Also, the gathering of wood for fuel and indiscriminate harvesting of timber has caused deforestation, which has made gully erosion and coastal erosion a common feature.

The flaring of gas in the vast oil fields of the region has seriously impacted on the environment. Nigeria has the worst record of gas flaring in the world.

"The sulphur dioxide produced by the fertilizer companies causes the devastation of forests, this gas also causes respiratory ailments in human beings," says Okecha. Poisonous chemicals abound in the delta area. When 8 000 drums containing about 3 500 tons of deadly chemicals were imported by Guan Fransco Rafelli, an Italian businessman, no one knew the impact until the villager Sunday Nana, who leased his premises in the Port town of Koko for a monthly charge of US \$50, died.

THE GOVERNMENT RESPONDS

In 1992, the government set up the Oil Mineral Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC), an intervention agency to pilot development and infrastructure provisions. But it folded. "Misappropriations, misapplication of resources and rampant corruption have led to the subversion of OMPADEC," said Osuntokun.

The betrayal of the people's trust by government and the oil companies has largely

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contributed to the raging crisis in the Niger Delta. The crisis flared in the 90s when the agitation of Ogoni people for the implementation of their bill of rights was rebuffed. It deepened after the death of Ken Saro-Wiwa, founder, Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) and leaders of the Ogoni community.

Other communities, who had kept silent reacted sharply, using youths to destabilise the work of the oil firms.

Today, there is frequent kidnapping of oil workers and other disturbances in the region. Oil workers live in fear and contractors operating in the area have withdrawn their equipment.

The present democratic government, in an attempt to tackle the injustice perpetrated against the region, obtained approval from the National Assembly for the establishment of Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC). Their one-year of operation has raised another controversy.

Billions are being sunk into projects without any impact on the communities, while the oil firms are now backing out from the legal responsibility. They say it was not proper to ask them to pay three percent of their yearly budget into the NDDC account.

This amounts to double taxation, as they pay a two percent education tax. However, NDDC has awarded more than 700 contracts valued at N18 billion.

But, Nigerian pro-environment groups such as the Nigerian Conservation Foundation (NCF), Environmental Rights Action (ERA), Environmental Information on Nigeria (ENVIN), Journalists Network for Environmental Conservation (JOUNET), Watch the Niger Delta and others are fighting to restore dignity to the Niger Delta region.

Many of them have canvassed for sustainable use of natural resources for the people. They have, at some points, engaged in open confrontations with the government and its agents.



AND THE PLIGHT OF THE JOURNALISTS

For Nigerian environmental journalists, covering the Niger delta at a time of crisis is like going to war. One needs courage and commitment. If the problem is serious, police or military protection is required to access communities.

The coverage of oil spills is another kettle of fish. Most of the disasters occur in remote areas. A trek of one or two hours is often needed to get to such sites. Where the incident happens in riverine areas, the stakes are higher. A boat ride in the sea for an hour is required.

The main constraint for journalists is poor remuneration, more so with government-owned media organisations. Sometimes journalists work for months without salaries. This has impacted on the ethics of the profession.

There are many private sector influences over the media through lawsuits. Community leaders sometimes connive with polluting firms to conceal information, with a view toward obtaining material compensation.

Again, the government policies adhered to by civil servants, researchers and scientists prohibit them from granting media interviews. Researchers have to speak to journalists on trust and rarely want to be quoted in stories.

But the major constraint is the inability of editors to see environmental stories as good copy. They are usually tucked into page three or four, while business or political stories are given prominence unless the issue at stake is a national disaster.

Sometimes I have been excited about a story because of the news value, only for the news editor, who is not groomed in the environmental field, to puncture such enthusiasm. He would rather have the story run on inside

pages or leave it out of the publication completely.

There are few opportunities for environmental journalists. Media houses hardly budget for training, except now that the information technology wave has made it imperative to educate journalists on the rudiments of using the computer and browsing the Internet.

The long years of distortions of the Niger Delta landscape have put the people in the back seat of development. Today, even the plan by government to bring relief to the communities through NDDC is in doubt. Critics say, it is aimed as scoring political points.

The World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) is the only chance for the Niger Delta people, to ensure government and the oil firms respect the norms and embark on sustainable exploitation of their natural resources.

“The region is one of the largest wetlands in the world. Unfortunately, the indigenous, whose land and sacrifices have produced the country’s wealth, have become more improvised.”



TOP: Erosion is a menace in Niger Delta villages.

ABOVE: Caked oil in the farmland.