

# INTERROGATING ENVIRONMENTAL POLLUTIONS IN THE NIGER DELTA THROUGH ADVOCACY COMMUNICATION

**Ata-Awaji Anthony REUBEN (PhD)**

Department of Mass Communication

Topfaith University, Mkpatak, Akwa Ibom State

atawajireuben@mail.com

&

**Peace OJONTA**

Department of Mass Communication

University of Nigeria, Nsukka

peace.ojonta@unn.edu.ng

&

**Francisca OGBOBE**

Department of Mass Communication

University of Nigeria, Nsukka

ogoo.ogbobe@unn.edu.ng

&

**Ngozi Dorothy UGWUJA**

Department of Mass Communication

University of Nigeria, Nsukka

dorathy.ugwuja@unn.edu.ng

## Abstract

**Background:** Environmental pollution is a planetary problem which has continued to elicit international and local actions aimed at remediating it. The Niger Delta region of Nigeria, due to over 70 years of oil exploration, is a hub of environmental pollution in great proportion. This situation affects aquatic and human lives on daily basis, raising the issue of social injustice in the region.

**Methods:** The paper adopts library research method in gathering secondary data from books, journals, newspapers and other academically relevant sources, in stressing the role

of advocacy journalism in raising awareness and championing for cessation in actions that cause environmental pollution in the Niger Delta. The paper is equally guided by three research questions and a theory known as Risk Society Theory.

**Results:** The paper ascertained that despite oil exploration activity in the Niger Delta region and wealth emanating from it which Nigeria largely relies on for its economic and political relevance among the comity of nations, many communities in the area and the people lack social amenities.

**Conclusion:** This portrays social injustice. The paper, therefore, sues for actions by government and multinationals in addressing environmental pollution in the Niger Delta and provide social, economic and political infrastructures that will ameliorate the plights of the people.

**Keywords:** Advocacy. Communication, Environment, Environmental Communication, Social Justice, Pollution.

## Introduction

Human rights and social justice are two concepts that have appeared several times in both academic and non-academic literatures, the world over. This is due to the importance of the concepts and their positions in human and societal development. As a result, one of the indices that measure societal development is tied to presence or absence of human rights and social justice. More so, many countries' constitutions, including that of the United States of America, Nigeria, Britain, to mention just a few, clearly codified human rights and social justice. Specifically, sections 33-35 of the Nigerian constitution, undoubtedly states the importance of human rights and social justice under the heading fundamental rights. Ayala et al (2011) view social justice as the impartial distribution of power, wealth and responsibilities in the society to all persons, irrespective of ethnicity, age and gender, etc. On its part, the United Nations (2006) notes that social justice requires strong and coherent policies in a multitude of areas. Fiscal, monetary and other economic

policies, as well as social policies, incorporate specific objectives but must all be geared towards the overall social goal of promoting the welfare of a country's citizens and increasingly, in this age of global interdependence, the citizens of the world. Foundation (2016) adds that social justice encompasses economic justice. Social justice is the virtue which guides us in creating those organised human interactions we call institutions. In turn, social institutions, when justly organised, provide human beings with access to what is good for the person, both individually and in their relationship with others. Social justice also imposes on people the responsibility to work with others to design and continually perfect societal institutions as tools for personal and social development.

Despite the cornucopia of literatures, documents and conventions that recognise the importance of social justice, some countries, including Nigeria, are still trampling upon what many see as fundamental human rights or God-given rights which negates the principles of social justice. This is despite the fact that the country's constitution recognises the importance of social justice. As a result, in the contemporary time, violations of human rights and denigration of social justice abound. This manifest in child abuse, human trafficking, child labour, environmental pollution and denial of people basic social amenities. According to Akinwunmi et al (2007) in Alfred *et al* (2022) in Nigeria and with particular regards to oil exploration in the Niger Delta, parent companies have not been very responsible in overseeing their subsidiaries especially as regards environmental standards, a situation that has led to widespread environmental degradation. Despite its contributions to the economy of Nigeria, as a result of its abundant oil and natural gas. Pitkin (2013) notes that the Niger Delta region is the natural oil and gas reserve base of Nigeria. This is in addition to the rich diversity of its ecosystem and wildlife. This has made the Niger Delta to be an epitome of the concept of resource curse

because exploitation of the resources of the region, particularly oil and gas, has occasioned widespread environmental degradation. Oil spillage into the environment is estimated at over 11 billion gallons, even as tragic incidents of oil spills which pose serious threat to people's lives cast shadow over the benefit of oil exploration in the Niger Delta region (Akeju and Oguntimein, 2023, p.76).

Amid this, communication scholars (Reuben and Ikot-Osin, 2020; Nwala, Okure, Otonnah and Onwugbuta (2024) have acknowledged the roles of advocacy journalism in championing for improved well-being of the people and good governance. In view of this, this study investigates how social justice could be achieved through advocacy journalism, to bring about healthy environment. This study is significant because its findings will not only increase literature in this area of study but will also guide policy makers and oil multinationals in their actions and operations. More so, environmental bodies at local and international levels, will find this work useful, as it explored the imperative of advocacy communication in achieving environmental and social justice.

## **Statement of Problem**

Constant gas flaring, oil spillage and other forms of environmental pollution go on in the Niger Delta region on daily basis due to oil exploration. Residents of Niger Delta region had and are still grappling with the situation for over 60 years now, even as land, aquatic and air pollutions abound in the area. These situations affect economic and social activities as well as the health of the people. As a result, human, aquatic and environment sustainability are threatened. This is because, as observed by Aghalino (2009) there is negligence on the part of government in the implementation of Nigerian Environmental laws, which contrasts with what is obtainable in Europe and North America.

Despite the situation above, there are limited studies on environmental and social justice as they relate to the Niger Delta region. This study, therefore, explores the efficacy of advocacy journalism in propagating social and environment justice in the Niger Delta region aimed at achieving environmental sustainability.

## **Research Objectives**

The aim of this study is to discuss the adoption of advocacy journalism in fighting for social and environmental justice for the people of Niger Delta region. Specifically, the objective of this study revolves around the need to:

1. Investigate impact of oil exploration on the Niger Delta region;
2. Examine the implication of oil exploration in the Niger Delta on the people and land and;
3. Find out the nexus between advocacy journalism and environmental and social justice

## **Materials and Methods**

The study is anchored on library research design. Thus, it is qualitative in nature, as data were collected from secondary sources which include journals, books and newspapers, among others. Consequently, the issues were subjected to Critical Discourse Analysis technique in reaching conclusions.

## **Literature Review**

Risk Society Theory is adopted for this paper. Risk Society theory, according to Haralambos, Holborn, Chapman and Moore (2013) is the brainchild of Ulrich Beck who is a sociologist. He postulated the theory in 1992. The theory tresses that in the past, science and technology helped to reduce material scarcity, thus improved living standard. The theory notes, however, that the consequence of economic growth and the development of science and technology

created new problems or risks stemming from human activity which have given rise to growing environmental problem. According to the theory, the risks that are being created include nuclear contamination in nuclear accidents, toxins in the environment and environmental degradation caused by pollution of various sorts.

This theory is suitable for this study because it explores the problems associated with science and technology which oil exploration falls under. The consequences of many years of oil exploration in the Niger Delta region include environmental pollution and social injustice which this paper addressed.

## Results

### Environmental Pollution in the Niger Delta

Wallace *et al.* (2020) observethat the extraction and movement of oil constitute an inherent risk of oil spillage which have caused serious damage to the environment and wildlife. Since the beginning of oil industry in the Niger Delta region, over 240,000 barrels of crude oil are being spilled into the environment yearly, causing prevalent pollution of the water, soil, and ecosystems. This view is corroborated by Akinbobola and Njor (2014) who state that in River State, Eleme has two out of four petroleum refineries in Nigeria, while Ogoniland experienced 2,976 life threatening oil spillages and Bodo had occurrences of incessant gas explosion which cause serious environmental pollution (p.32).Painting theconsequence of environmental pollution in the Niger Delta, Aghalino (2009) asserts that important economic and botanical plant species have been destroyed in the region, as traditional healers now search further before herbs, bark of trees and roots could be sourced for treatment of minor illnesses. This is the effect of environmental pollution **which** Reuben *et al* (2025) hint that environmental pollution is a major issue in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. It has a devastating effect on the earth. Ibeau (2008) in

Reuben (2021) note that any hope of crude oil becoming the engine of development in the Niger Delta has now been completely ruined. The pattern of crude oil exploitation in the region is unsustainable. The effect of this is that many renewable resources like land and underground aquifers are destroyed in the process of extracting crude oil in the Niger Delta region. Meanwhile, study by Nwala, et al (2024) found that issues around environmental degradation of Niger Delta are not given adequate attention by government its relevant agencies. Similarly, Sado (2016) notes that neither government officials at all levels nor the transnational oil companies are concerned about this ugly trend. One is left with the unconsidered question of whether or not government officials are on the pay roll of the transnational oil companies. Sado (2016) emphatically maintains that the federal government of Nigeria has been hobnobbing with the oil companies on cessation of gas flaring.

Orluwene (2008) also bemoans the situation as he asserts that the Niger Delta region of Nigeria has had a long history of injustice. According to him, from imperial humiliation through colonial exploitation, the region has journeyed to the present crisis of internal colonialism, pitching the people not only against foreigners as in the past but against their own government, which emanated from conflict over the appropriation and control of environmental resources. On his part, Ejibunu (2007) posits that the discovery of oil in the Niger Delta region in 1957 triggered a chain of events that has led to the political and economic marginalisation of the inhabitants. The distribution of resources from the federation account has been another source of marginalisation for the Niger delta. Prior to 1999, the allocation to the Niger Delta from the federation account of revenues from oil, decreased progressively as Nigeria became more dependent on oil. In 1960, the allocation was 50%, then down to 45% in 1970, declining to 20% in 1982, down to 3%

in 1992. It was raised to 13% following persistent agitations from the Niger Delta people.

## **Advocacy Communication**

Senam *et al* (2012) view advocacy communication as deliberate use of facts and information to persuade decision makers to a particular cause in order to take suitable action. Therefore, advocacy communication, according to Enobakhare and Nyekwere (2012) involves raising awareness of issues and concerns to produce change, organising information into arguments to convince a specific group to take action on a specific goal. Wikipedia (2012) in Enobakhare and Nyekwere (2012) adds that advocacy communication is a branch of journalism that intentionally and transparently adopts a non-objective viewpoint usually for some social or political drive. Reuben and Ikot-Osin (2020) assert that through advocacy journalism, the media push for a change of situation, improvement of the situation, or maintaining a situation that is considered satisfactory. The above cited scholars add that advocacy journalism is applied in seeking justice for the less privileged people, raped victims, flood victims, widows, pensioners and different social issues that require improvement and/or sustenance for the good of the masses. Communication is indispensable at all stages of social interaction and in achieving individual and community objectives. It is through communication that individuals and communities are able to share their desires and mobilise each other to take actions, which would bring about improvement in their living conditions (Obot, 2008, p.468). Communication that mobilises people for any development initiative or for any cause and makes them to take action, is usually advocacy in approach. This is because it is well-tailored and sustained over time by the mass media. The implication of this is that the mass media set agenda on such issue to be fought for and adopt a non-objective but

fact-based communication strategy in ensuring that such issue is given attention by stakeholders.

## **Environment Sustainability**

According to World Bank, cited in Nwogwugwu, Alao and Egwuonwu (2012) there are five great plagues of mankind: war, famine, pestilence, environmental pollution and death. The Niger Delta is in the throes of becoming an environmental wastebasket. From the oil spills to the round-the-clock gas flares and effluents from industrial wastes, the fragile ecosystem of the Niger Delta is under constant assault. Amid this situation, environmental sustainability in the Niger Delta will be an elusive thought because environmental sustainability connotes the availability and use of the environment in a manner that it supports life optimally and still stands better for use for the same purpose or more by future generation. This explains why Asadu (2012) hints that environmental sustainability is the protection of the environment from degradation, erosion, gas flaring and other activities capable of attacking the ozone layer, while Ite (2016), sees environmental sustainability as that which requires the use of environmental good and services in such a way that their productive capacities are not reduced, nor their overall contribution to human well-being diminished. Meanwhile, Wilson (2013) opines that the discovery of oil in the south-south region seems to have added to the environmental problems of the region. Cases of oil spill which worsen its environmental conditions are often reported in the region. He maintains that oil pollution has become a recurring decimal in the south-south region. Sadly, rather than ensuring environmental sustainability, human actions have continued to impact negatively on the environment.

Environmental sustainability cannot take place in an atmosphere of environmental degradation and/or pollution. To avoid environmental degradation and ensure

environmental sustainability, human beings have to change the way they live, treat one another and nonhuman environment well. Consciously managing our environment not to harm others will require good moral behaviour, which is also known as environmental ethics (Ocholi, 2022). Ocholi is also of the view that we cannot blame environmental pollution on religion, science and technology or social and economic structures but ourselves. Rather, as observed by Rourke and Boyer (1998), to avoid environmental degradation, we either restrict economic growth and development since human quest for development has been responsible for environmental degradation or countries of the world make political and financial commitment that will promote environmental safety and conserve the environment.

## **Discussion**

### **Environmental Pollution, Advocacy Communication and Social Injustice**

Associated with oil exploration and production are benefits and disasters. Nigeria has benefited so much from oil exploration from the Niger Delta region while many people of the oil-rich region are wallowing in poverty. More so, they lack good drinking water due to land and air pollution; absence of electricity and other social amenities. Ana, (2011) while lamenting the situation of things in the Niger Delta, notes that air pollution in the area, is now a normal occurrence and a serious environmental problem confronting the people of the region. According to him, the air pollution of the region comes from operations of oil industries that usually release a barrage of substances like volatile organics, oxides of carbon, nitrogen, sulphur, particulate matter, heavy metals and other toxics at levels that exceed both the national and international standards. Nriagu et al. (2016) observe that the chronic nature of the oil pollution and its associated environmental and social impacts may have an insidious impact on one's physical health and mental health such as

increased risk for high levels of distress which are different from those of discrete traumatic events. Wizor and Eludonyi (2020) also opine that environmental problems such as oil spill have a way of affecting the socio-economic life of the people through dislodging them from their traditional means of sustaining themselves. As a result of this, unemployment will spring forth followed by famine, poverty and the destruction of ecological systems.

Osuagwu and Olaifa (2018) add that the release of petroleum substance into the streams, lakes, rivers, beaches, seas, oceans and land can be identified as the major cause of restiveness in the Niger Delta, which arises from the neglect of the environment resulting in extreme impoverishment of the peoples of the region. Report by Amnesty International (2016), states that oil pollution in the Niger Delta has generated both local and international outrage and condemnation over many decades. The anger and frustrations were related to the constant destruction of livelihood and the natural environment of the oil-bearing communities by multinational oil companies operating in the region. As a result of the situation, millions of farmers and fishermen in the Niger Delta region, have been impoverished.

Serious effort and strategies by stakeholders and relevant institutions, particularly the mass media, are required in addressing the situation discussed above. This is because the Niger Delta area where oil, which is the mainstay of Nigeria's economy is produced, cannot be placed side-by-side with many other parts of Nigeria, on the scale of development. For instance, the road (East-West road) that leads to the Eleme Petrochemical Industry, is a deathtrap. At least 11 persons lost their lives in 2024 year due to fire explosion occasioned by fall of oil tanker; and other accidents, due to the deplorable state of the road. This cannot be said about the road leading to the Kaduna refinery with less capacity and activity, compared to the Eleme Petrochemical Industry. The situation in the Niger Delta justifies the questions ask by

Hussar and Horvath (2011) which include what is fair with regard to access, use and protection of the natural environment. What justice principles should be followed for resource distribution, and how can decision makers address potentially unequal benefits across groups. Who is included in the domain of environmental rights? The answers to these questions are that nothing is fair with regard to the state of the environment in the Niger Delta; the land in the Niger Delta is used without consideration for environmental sustainability. The justice principles that should be followed for resource distribution is that the Niger Delta region deserves equal social amenities like Abuja and Kaduna, for instance, with the presence of government's institutions and priority.

More so, the clean-up of the oil-impacted lands in the Niger Delta should be done immediately, to allow for fruitful farming and fishing expeditions, which are the major occupations of the people because the possible presence of hydrocarbons in fish is a matter of serious concern for the people of Niger Delta region. The fisheries sector itself is suffering due to the destruction of fish habitat in the mangrove zone and highly persistent contamination of many creeks, making them unsuitable for fishing (UNEP Report, 2011, p.181). Hussar and Horvath's (2011) questions discussed above are germane. The mass media in Nigeria, through advocacy communication, can ask similar and more questions, and go on to set agenda on the environment, social and economic situations of the people of the Niger Delta area amid environmental pollution. Media advocacy has been hailed for contributing to the success of some initiatives the world over. Diri and Ezeji, (2019) hint that advocacy communication positions journalists as advocates for social change. This perhaps explains why Reuben and Ikot-osin (2020) observe that advocacy journalism is both a philosophy and an action. It is a philosophy since it takes on an approach that is aimed at interpreting and analysing situations, issues and policies to enhance understanding of issues by the

masses. On the other hand, it is an action because it involves an implementation or adoption of well-thought-out communication strategy and approach that seeks a change of policies or improvement of a situation. Advocacy, especially in environmental communication highlights broader effort to ensure environmental sustainability (Weder & Samanta, 2021, p.3). Cookey (2024) acknowledges that communication is key in any efforts aimed at inducing change in the society, including encouraging positive attitude toward the environment. Study by Bigman et al (2024) ascertain that environmental behaviour has a glut of determinants which can be influenced through adequate communication. As observed by Hussar and Horvath (2011), the enhanced salience of justice in regard to environmental challenges complements the fact that many people believe that there is a moral or ethical component underlying the distribution and treatment of environmental entities.

## Conclusion

This study aimed at investigating how social justice could be achieved through advocacy journalism, to bring about healthy environment in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. This is due to the threat of environmental sustainability, health, social and economic challenges posed by environmental pollution in the area.

The study is guided by three research objectives and Risk Society theory. In line with the research objectives, the study ascertained that many years of oil exploration in the Niger Delta region brought about gas flaring and oil spillage, among others; that the situation has impacted negatively on the people and their land, thus affecting the health, economic and social status and that in view of the situation and the potency of advocacy communication as espoused by communication scholars (Reuben Ikot-Osin , 2020; Cookey, 2004 & Diri and Ezeji, 2019), the mass media should intensify efforts in adopting this subjective, scientific and

well-designed approach in championing for environmental and social justice in the Niger Delta.

The findings above agree with the submission by Ibeano (2008) who laments the level of social injustice in the Niger Delta region, asserting that if Nigerian government and other stakeholders get the Niger Delta right, Nigeria would be put on the right part. He adds that the Niger Delta has become emblematic of all that is wrong with Nigeria, as what is happening in that region is a clear lesson of the dialectical relation between affluence and affliction. Yet, many Nigerian leaders smile to the bank daily because of proceeds from the oil in the Niger Delta region while millions of ordinary Nigerians in the creeks of the Niger Delta drown in it and have their livelihoods wiped out by oil spillage and reckless discharge of effluents of crude oil mining and refining into a fragile ecosystem.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this paper, we recommend that:

1. Government, oil multinationals and other stakeholders should quickly address environmental pollution in the Niger Delta region to ensure environmental sustainability.
2. Government and other stakeholders should provide social, economic and political infrastructures that will ameliorate the plights of the people.
3. Extant laws on environment and particularly, on oil company operations in Nigeria, should be enforced, to ensure compliance to environmental best practices.

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