

COMMUNITIES AT RISK: AN AFTERMATH OF GLOBAL CAPITALISM

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper was to highlight community risks that are a product of global capitalism, as perpetuated through the activities of Oil Multinational Corporations (MNCs) in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria. Like globalization, global capitalism characterizes the paradoxical coexistence of free market enterprise and community risks. The progress in the use of modern technologies no doubt exposes our societies to several socio-economic and health risks. These risks are more prevalent in oil producing communities, where the desire to amass wealth at all costs is the major factor propelling the socio-economic activities by the governments and the oil MNCs. This paper is based on our field study, which commenced in 2004 and culminated in 2013, in five communities in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. However, the analysis of the core issues in this paper was influenced by Beck's concept of the Risk Society. The position of this paper is that although the exploration of crude oil in the Niger Delta has brought some socio-economic gains to a few connected to the Nigerian government, majority of the people, particularly those in the oil producing region are faced with a plethora of risks in their daily lives.

Keywords: Globalization, Global capitalism, Oil Exploration, Risk Society, Gas flare

Introduction

Global capitalism has been analyzed and supported by many government officials, business men and women, as well as some scholars as very positive and a step in the right direction if society is to progress, and, individuals empowered to self-actualize and access life basic necessities. In theory, this is very good and has become a reality for a few but for the majority of people, the story is different. Many communities across the globe are at risk as a result of global economy. For example, contemporary societies now practically depend on oil and gas for a better and improved

standard of living, unfortunately, the exploration and extraction of oil and gas come with detrimental consequences for some local communities both in short and long terms.

The risks to these communities could include; pollution of the environment with its negative effects on people's health and wellbeing, disruption of indigenous cultures as well as a detrimental effect on people's means of livelihood. On a small level and rare case, we have seen how potentially, the pollution of the marine environment could be devastating as a result of global economic activities as in the Oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010 and US government's overwhelming concern about the effect on the marine environment. However, the focus of this paper is not on the United States, but some communities in Nigeria, whose citizens do not have a voice or agency to speak on their behalf about the detrimental effects that oil exploration and extraction is having on them and their environment. Consequently, this paper seeks to highlight the risks that are a product of global capitalism, as perpetuated through the activities of Oil MNCs in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria. This paper is based on a field study we conducted in five communities in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria between 2010 and 2013. The analysis section of this paper is based on Beck's concept of the Risk Society (1992), which exposes the contradictory coexistence of uncontrolled growth in the use of modern technologies particularly in the oil exploration industry as a means of amassing wealth and its increasing risks for the states, social organizations and the well-being of community members.

Literature Review

The influx of MNCs to countries of the south, particularly Nigeria, has detrimental consequences for local people and has not provided them with new economic opportunities and other progressive individual choices (Adalikwu, 2007). Instead, the process of globalization that encouraged the establishment of MNCs in developing countries has undermined the culture of these people (Kabeer, 1994). For instance, due to the practices of the MNCs in the exploration and exploitation of oil in the Niger Delta region, the environment has been degraded and the people's means of livelihood destroyed (Zambia Communiqué, 2000). In addition, the deteriorating household economic position in the Niger Delta region has been attributed in large part to the pollution arising from careless and unmonitored oil production (Adalikwu, 2007). Also, the stagnation of the agricultural sector in Nigeria is due to Nigeria's sole dependence on oil products and exports, which have been entrusted to the multinational conglomerates that have the financial and technical means to invest in the oil sector (Hajzler, 2000).

The Nigerian case is peculiar because, the government in its quest to join the global economy did not only change from a focus on agricultural production to a focus on the exploration and extraction of crude oil, but it also encouraged privatization without adequate provision for the protection of the welfare of its citizens and the environment. This permitted several multinational oil corporations (MNCs) to take advantage of the political/socio-economic environment in Nigeria and have violated the basic human rights of the people through oil exploration/extraction activities in the Niger Delta region. People in this region, who were used to sustaining their families through farming and trading in agricultural goods, have been rendered redundant, unable to provide food for their families as a result of a “diminished agricultural productivity and viable local economies due to the environmental and social degradation caused by oil exploitation” (Clark et al, 1999: 10).

Several research reports indicate that the continuous and uncontrolled activities of MNCs in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria promote uncontrolled gas flaring, the use of old, rusted oil pipes, pipe blow outs, oil well/pipe leaks, and numerous oil spillages resulting in the death of many people including women and children. While this region generates more than 90% of national budget and foreign earning yearly for Nigeria, the majority of the Niger Delta region indigenes see these resources as more of a curse to them than a blessing. For instance, Saro-Wiwa (1992) implied that the uncontrolled activities of the MNCs and the inability of both the state and federal governments to implement internationally documented safety regulations have deprived the people of this region of the land, rivers and creeks that did not only provide sustenance in abundance, but were also a spiritual inheritance, sacred and bound up intricately with the life of the community as this cultural and spiritual heritage was later spoiled by oil and stolen by the state.

Similarly, Apter (1998: 154) noted that, “what the state seized, the oil companies destroyed, polluting the farmlands and fishing creeks with spills and runoffs while filling the air with noxious gas and acid rain.” Thus, the ecological destruction of creeks and waterways in the remote areas of the Niger Delta is equated to the pollution of the cultural and public sphere by an invasive and extractive petro-state since oil is what gives the nation its foreign exchange. Consequently, the devastation of land and water amounts to the destruction of tradition itself, a tradition that sustains a harmonious balance between a natural ecology, economy, and community since the traditional cultural lifestyle of the people includes aspects such as health and economic pursuits.

Research Methodology and Outcomes

In order to achieve the objective of the study that resulted in this paper, qualitative and quantitative research methods were employed. We conducted both survey and in-depth interviews with people from Obelle, Omoku, Obete, Ogbogu, and Obagi communities in the Niger Delta region. The in-depth interviews were carried out through the use of a critical ethnographic paradigm. The in-depth interview protocol was based on sixty-two items. The interviews consisted of open-ended questions and required the hiring of translators who translated the questions from English into the local languages and conducted the interviews based on these questions for those who did not speak the English language.

Most importantly, these interviews centered on the quality of life (access to basic human needs) of the local population, and the effect of crude oil exploration on their economic activities, particularly their household economy. Five community leaders (two chiefs and three youth leaders) from five target communities were selected because of their in-depth knowledge of the political and economic relationships between their communities, the oil MNCs and the government. We asked the people to share their stories and experiences in the face of oil exploitation activities with regard to the past and present and how these activities have affected their daily lives and environment. The following are the qualitative findings on the risks of global capitalism, perpetuated through oil exploration activities as perceived by the participants in the study:

Risks on the Environment, Agriculture, and Health/quality of life

The activities of the oil MNCs have brought about the destruction of the ecosystem in the Niger Delta region. The source of drinking water has also been contaminated with gas emission, which has made the water impossible to drink because of the high level of iron and lead content of the water. This substance has also helped in damaging the iron zincs used to roof their houses, which also was a source of drinking water during the raining season as rainwater was collected through the roofing sheets for drinking. Confirming this experience, one of the interviewees from our study states that “ *the activities of oil exploration has affected the environment for example, there are some places where rain water was the main source of drinking water but with the gas flaring and acid rain, people no longer drink rain water due to the contamination. After rainfall, the rainwater collected will congeal with black particles, which is not good and inhaling the fumes from the gas flare makes people sick. You will find out that before one reaches 30 to 40 years, one is plagued with one sickness or another.* ”

The people in these communities are exposed to all kinds of chemicals; oil spills and pipeline blowouts, which are hazardous to the

people's health. Yet they lack primary health care facilities and have also lost their economic independence. The quality of life of the people is deteriorating as a result of utter neglect, suppression and marginalization. Most communities in this region are beset with a plethora of problems, which make their living conditions very poor as they lack the basic necessities of life. For example, our field research in the five target communities revealed that there were no provisions of basic needs. In response to my question, one of the interviewees stated, *"There is nothing like health care, water supply, and they do not care about the electricity. Corroborating this response, UNDP (2004) noted, "there is no potable water, infrastructures (dilapidated schools, where they exist), drainage, life and property are insecure, the environment is unhealthy, there is unemployment, and lack of primary healthcare among others."*

Yet the people are exposed to all kinds of toxins as narrated by one of the interviewees, *"So many of our waters are polluted. You see so many people now complaining of stomach pain, and typhoid fever all around; it is because of the pollution of water. You know that when this gas is being flared all the toxin enters the air and enters into our well water. The water is no longer good for human consumption. The land is also affected. You know the smoke in the air, when rain falls, it brings it down on the land and this affects the crops. Even the air we breathe is all polluted because of this gas flaring."* Birisibe (2001) also noted from her study of the region that, the exposure to crude oil has detrimental consequences for the local population and stated, *"inhalation of high levels of crude oil fumes can lead to adverse effects on the nervous and respiratory systems, sometimes causing life threatening chemical pneumonitis and other systemic effects."* Accordingly, one of the interviewees in our study stated, *"I want to tell you that in this place now people no longer sleep with their doors closed, the temperature is always charged 24 hours. So you see people with high incidents of skin cancer, stroke, rashes, high blood pressure and related illnesses."*

In the course of oil exploitation and extraction activities in "the Niger Delta, which records the worst environmental pollution in Nigeria, if not the world as a whole, farmlands are destroyed, rivers polluted, shrines desecrated, bodies of dead relatives carelessly exhumed and grinded by construction companies' bulldozers, women and children often killed in avoidable pipeline fires, and, harmless protesters callously killed and/or raped by agents of the federal government and oil companies." For example, one of the Interviewees stated: *"During their process of searching for oil they shoot their dynamites here and there even in front of our shrines, they shoot. During their search for oil there was a case at Akabuka where they caught a married woman in the bush and used her. I think it was reported that the married woman died. Yes, they raped her."*

Most people in this region no longer have access to farm-lands as the government has taken over all viable lands through the various land decrees, leaving the people in double jeopardy. They have been completely dispossessed of whatever little access they had to their farmlands. The fishing creeks on the other hand have been polluted and contaminated by the activities of the oil companies. Even where land is found, the people can only produce a very poor yield of food due to the over- use of the land and lack of access to resources such as fertilizers. In response to some of the questions on agriculture, one of the interviewees stated, *“Formerly, when you plant crops, they will yield very well but now, the crops do not yield well because of the activities of Shell. A year before last, there was a fire outbreak in our farmland and all the cassava in every farm died. Since Shell came to Nigeria we have been experiencing these problems. They burn down farmlands, pollute the air, water and land and the crops yield is very small. People get sick and they do not have money to go to the hospital and as a result, they die very young.”*

Another interviewee stated, *“Those lands we have, we used to farm on and they have acquired with little or no compensation so the place we used to farm is no longer owned by us. Now we cannot even afford to go and buy from the nearby villages because the money is not there and not only that they have polluted our water. If you go there the aquatic life like the crayfish and lobsters that used to be there have all ran away. You can’t see them again even the fish if you taste some of them they taste crude. Even if you go to our well now or I bring it and you check it you will see oil on top.*

Gas flare is very common in this region and negatively impacts the environment and the people’s health and is usually flared close to people’s homes and farms. The toxins from the gas flare causes air, water, and land pollution, which also negatively affects agricultural production. In view of the situation, one of the interviewees stated, *“In a situation where a farmer depends on what comes out of his farm to educate, feed and clothe his family considering that the yield is very small has taken a toll on the people. If your farm is not destroyed, your health is affected. Once something is air born, it can affect anybody.”*

Yet another interviewee stated, *“... Like in my own house now, there is nothing that you will plant that will germinate very well. The thing will maybe grow a little and die off because we have an oil well very close to our house.”*

Analysis of Findings

The framework of this analysis is based on Beck’s concept of the Risk Society (1992), which highlights the contradictory coexistence of uncontrolled growth in the use of modern technologies particularly in the oil

exploration industry as a means of amassing wealth and its increasing risks for the states, social organizations and the well-being of community members. The findings of this study further support the assertions that the presence or relocation of MNCs to developing countries does not necessarily bring about socio-economic improvement to the local population (Apter, 1998, Adalikwu, 2007). Instead, it brings with it negative consequences for the local people (Saro-Wiwa, 1992, Adalikwu, 2007). For example, in a bid to privatize, the Nigerian government promulgated land decrees that alienated men and women from their farmlands, consequently depriving them of the ability to provide for their families. The local people's socio-economic situation gradually worsened, as they became saddled with family and societal responsibilities without the resources to meet their needs.

Most people believe that global economy is geared toward economic development and emancipation of people from poverty and want (Nalini et al 1997). This positive position depicts a progressive expansion of individual choice, elimination of life-threatening diseases, prolonged life expectancy, as well as socio-economic growth. Although our data show some positive impacts, having 73.9 percent of women and 75.8 percent of men negatively affected by the activities of the oil MNCs in the five communities in our field study of the Niger Delta region illustrates that global economy does not have the purported positive effect for everyone.

Using the perspective put forth by Beck (1992), this paper asserts that globalization in contemporary society has created a society that is based on the commonality of anxiety instead of the commonality of needs. According to Wallace and Wolf (2005: 193), people in the industrial society accepted the side effects of modernization because of the rewards it offered in the struggle against scarcity. Unfortunately, the major concern in post industrial society is no longer a focus only on the provision of resources to meet people's basic needs but anxiety over the risks created by global economy and its attendant inequalities. Like Beck (1992), the position of this paper is that, although global economy has some benefits, these are outweighed by the risks it creates for most communities around the world, as indicated by the following comparison between the research data for this paper and several other studies.

The perception of most of the respondents as highlighted in the above section on findings collaborate with Saro-Wiwa (1992)'s argument that the relocation of MNCs to countries of the south particularly Nigeria, has detrimental consequences for local people and has not provided them with new economic opportunities and other progressive individual choices. Instead, the process of globalization that encouraged the relocation of MNCs to countries of the South has undermined the culture of these people (Kabeer,

1994) and resulted repudiation of the realization of their economic and social rights.

The outcome of this paper highlights the detrimental consequences of global economy on the environment and the degradation of people's health and means of livelihood through the exploitation of oil in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. In the same light, it was noted in Zambia Communiqué (2000) that, due to the practices by the MNCs in the exploration and exploitation of oil in the Niger Delta region, the environment has been degraded and the people's means of livelihood destroyed.

The deteriorating household economic position in the Niger Delta region has been attributed in large part to the pollution arising from careless and unmonitored oil production. Also, the stagnation of the agricultural sector in Nigeria is due to Nigeria's sole dependence on oil products and exports, which have been entrusted to the multinational conglomerates that have the financial and technical means to invest in the oil sector (Hajzler, 2000). The land, rivers and creeks did not only provide sustenance in abundance but were also a spiritual inheritance, sacred and bound up intricately with the life of the community (Saro-Wiwa, 1992). Unfortunately, these have been desecrated and destroyed during oil exploration activities as noted by some of the respondents mentioned earlier in this paper.

The cultural and spiritual "heritage of the indigenous people in the Niger Delta region was later spoiled by oil exploration activities and stolen by the state." (Saro Wiwi, 1992). In view of this, Apter (1998: 154) noted that, "what the state seized, the oil companies destroyed, polluting the farmland and fishing creeks with spills and runoffs while filling the air with noxious gas and acid rain." Thus, the ecological destruction of creeks and waterways in the remote areas of the Niger Delta is equated to the pollution of the cultural and public sphere by an invasive and extractive petro-state since oil is what gives the nation its foreign exchange. Consequently, the devastation of land and water amounts to the destruction of tradition itself, a tradition that sustains a harmonious balance between a natural ecology, economy, and community since the traditional cultural lifestyle of the people includes aspects such as health and economic pursuits.

Conclusion

Although the exploration of crude oil in the Niger Delta has brought some socio-economic gains to a few connected to the Nigerian government, majority of the people, particularly those in the oil producing region are faced with a plethora of risks in their daily lives. According to Jarvis (2007), these risks challenge the established safety system of risk calculations. The socio-economic and health risks, which people in developing oil producing countries are facing seem immeasurable and far from the possibility for

control, community re-education and reparation. This is partly due to the lack of commitments on the part of the local, state and federal governments. The situation is further exacerbated by the uneven applications of the international rules and regulations guiding the exploration and exploitation of oil in less developed countries of the world (Adalikwu, 2007). In this regard, it seems plausible to infer that the key players of global capitalism craftily designed; and, are implementing rules and regulations that make it possible for MNCs to concentrate capital flows in developed economies while exploiting and starving the resources of developing economies (Yeung & Dicken, 2000).

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