

Dynamics of Poverty among Niger Delta Women: An Empirical Assessment

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Abstract

This study examines the dynamics of poverty among the Niger Delta women of Nigeria with particular reference to the Isoko's, Ijaws, and the Itsekeri ethnic nationalities. The data for the study were obtained from field survey of 450 households from three Local Government Areas of the study. The results obtained from the study shows that there is the existence of a widespread of poverty among the women of the area even when there is obvious oil companies' economic activities. The study also shows that despite the various government policies and programs aimed at alleviating poverty, a greater proportion of women in the area do not benefit from such programs. The paper concluded by suggesting that the government should pursue a policy aimed at targeting the women of the study area and that the establishment of empowerment programs/skill acquisition centers for women will be of immense benefit.

Keywords: Niger Delta, poverty, women

JEL Codes: Q28, P36

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is the sixth largest oil-producing country in the world, and the largest and potentially richest country in Africa. It has the largest number of black people in the world – with a land area of close to one million square kilometres, and a population of well over 140 million. Nigeria is blessed with rich human and mineral resources. Its oil nourishes the world – Western and Southern. Its natural resources generate billions of dollars to its coffers on a daily basis. Nigeria is situated along the eastern coast of the Gulf of Guinea, and just north of the equator. It is bordered on the west by Benin, on the north by Niger and Chad, and on the east by Cameroon. The country's coastline spans more than 800 km along the Niger Delta, the home of oil.

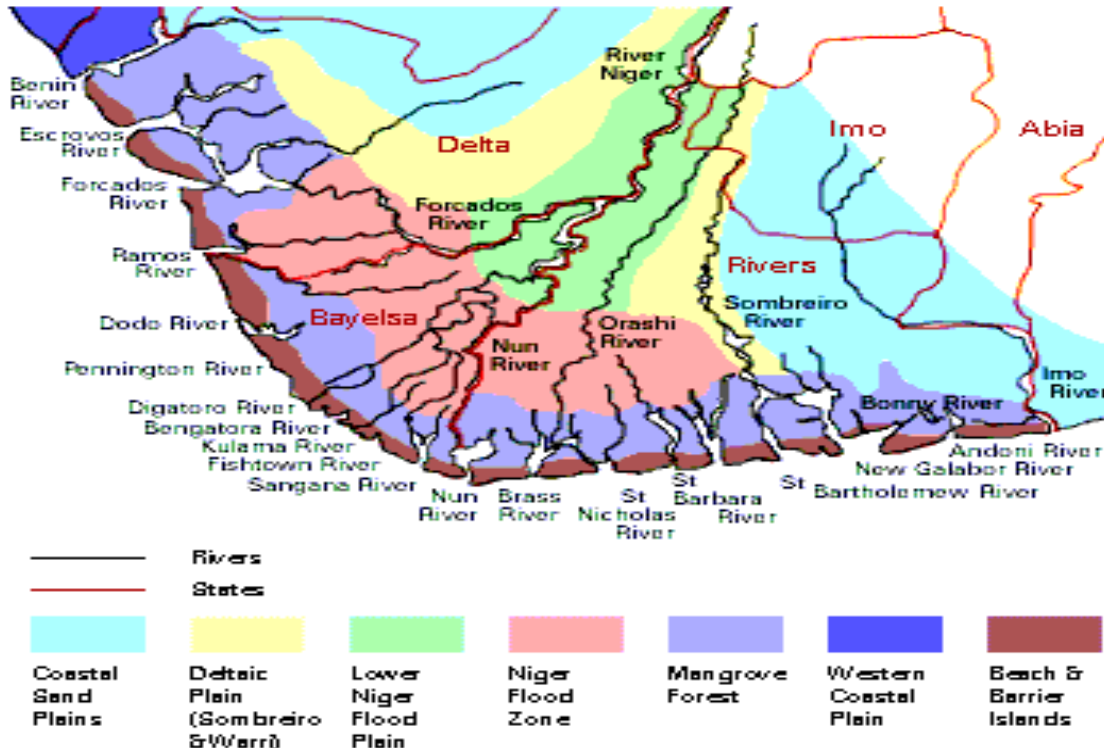
The Niger Delta is made of nine states, six of which are coastal. The only source of potable water in the coastal states is from groundwater extraction. However, the increase in population and industrial development has brought about high and heavy construction activities and the peculiar location of the

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coastal states have affected the life of the people adversely. The tributaries of the River Niger traverse through these states and empty into the Atlantic Ocean. It is one of the largest wetlands in the world (NDES, 1998).

Figure 1: Map of Niger Delta



Source: Atubi, A. O. 2008.

The discovery of oil in the Niger Delta region in the early 50s has come with mixed blessings – joy to the government and misery to the indigenous communities who have recoined the government slogan of “oil boom” to their “oil doom”. The massive on-shore and off-shore exploitation of oil deposits in the Niger Delta area has inflicted an unprecedented and severe environmental degradation. Incessant oil spills, continuous gas flaring, and depositing of dangerous contents of crude oil into human residential environments with its attendant devastating socio-economic consequences have combined to aggravate environmental degradation of coastal Nigeria (Jamabo and Ibim, 2006). The mangrove swamps are disappearing; the spills have an adverse

effect on marine life and are responsible for failing crop yield, poisoned waters, dying forests, and vanishing wildlife.

Fishing, once the main occupation of the indigenous communities, is now an unprofitable one. Soil contamination through bioaccumulation of dangerous heavy metals has a devastating effect on both terrestrial and plant life. Once edible vegetables are now poisonous. The disappearance of once vibrant communities is indicative of the inability of the devastated environment to support and sustain human life and human settlements (Koziell, 2004).

This scenario, gloomy and grim as it is, led to desperation and restiveness of the youths of the region. In the midst of the affluence of the oil prospecting communities, the endemic poverty of indigenous communities is glaring. Most generally suffer from socio-economic and political marginalization based on historical colonization as well as present day economic and political processes, which now must be rectified if objectives of sustainable development are to be realized at the local level.

The environment is under increasing demand to provide resources for human activity and absorb waste in an era of increasing *per capita* consumption and astronomical increase in population. Of serious concern to indigenous communities is the devastating environmental degradation caused by oil spillages and gas flaring (Oboreh, 1998). Profit has always been the driving force controlling activities of oil companies. While oil companies have profited from oil resources, local communities are subjected to the excruciating agony of non-stop emissions that cause stratospheric ozone depletion, skin cancer, severe mucosal irritation, nausea, and vomiting, leaving an environment practically unable to sustain human life (Peters, 2006). The ethnic groups living in the Niger Delta are the Isokos, Ijaws, Itshekiris, Urhobos, and Kalabaris. They are forced to keep their villages small due to lack of dry land. They live among creeks, lagoons and salt marshes, making fishing and the salt trade part of everyday business.

This paper is a survey of the environment and the level of poverty among indigenous women in the Niger Delta.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The livelihood framework focuses on resource base and people's capacities to act within specific social, economic, political, ecological and cultural contexts. It starts with an analysis of local resources and skills available for constructing livelihood activities. The canons of the framework include people's strengths and potentials which may lie in social networks. This framework shows livelihoods can largely be understood in the process of scanning local knowledge within locally specific contexts where they occur. Therefore, understanding livelihood analysis with the interplay of different processes operating at different levels is essential. Livelihoods analysis stems from mapping out different resources at people's disposal. These resources include tangible assets such as land and properties as well as non-tangible assets such as law and policies. These resources are socially constructed. Thus, people's negotiation for, and utilization of resources is a product of local and global processes in construction of social reality. This assumption and the beliefs that local capacities and voices should be brought forward in research and development planning gained popularity in the 1980s especially through the adoption of participatory approaches in rural development (Akeredolu, 1986).

This line of thinking was impregnated by a gradual shift in social change paradigm from the primacy of centralized development planning to increasing emphasis on people's own activities. It is in this context that democratization of rural development practice and power of people's agency can be understood. Agency implies capacity to manage thought processes, regulate behavior, and produce changes through actions. Ability to navigate within social networks is a component of livelihood territory, strengthening their cultural identity and creating a more secure base for future negotiations. This approach is at the root of the restiveness of the oil producing states of Nigeria, where indigenous communities, organizations and NGOs have focused their attention on achieving formal recognition of indigenous communities' land rights and the right to control the resources on their land in an effort to manage different land pressures and

maintain an economic base that is sustainable and beneficial to future generations of indigenous communities (Onosode, 1998).

From what is known of the Niger Delta and the oil business in Nigeria today, a lot seem not to have been achieved. Pipeline explosions (from time to time) where hundreds of lives are lost with lots of buildings razed and the entire earth surface burnt no longer make news in Nigeria.

The multinational oil companies and all stakeholders have not devised ways of protecting, securing and avoiding such incidences which impoverish the naturally rich region. Past efforts by all the stakeholders have not achieved desired goals. The rich alluvia soil for farming have been devastated and left the people in absolute poverty (Orubu, 1999a).

Livelihood is a process by which people make a living through specific assets, capabilities, and activities (Carney, 1998; Ellis, 2000). Earlier anthropological study showed that livelihood extends beyond basic life necessities to social relationships management and identity maintenance (Render, 2005). Obviously, with an overlap of different layers of social life based on resources and their utilization livelihood is a holistic phenomenon. Essentially, the discourse of livelihood cannot be disconnected from understanding the level of poverty in the environment. Uncontrolled extraction of oil and gas has led to mismanagement of resources and depletion of valuable biodiversity, which encompasses all species of plants, animals, micro-organisms and their ecosystems, and ecological recesses (Zylicz, 2000). Over-exploitation of fishing resources followed by agriculture, transport sources/routes, and poorly planned and managed coastal developments have led to rapid degradation of vulnerable coastal and offshore habitats (Orubu, 1999b).

The study of livelihood is essential for understanding people-environment interaction, and its implications for poverty alleviation. Situations in which some people live in absolute poverty and some live in prosperity can be linked to political economy of environmental differences. Normally, people in resource-endowed environments will be more prosperous than counterparts in disadvantaged areas. This model does not fit the Nigerian paradox of poverty in

the midst of plenty resources. People in disadvantaged areas seem to be at higher advantage than counterparts in resource-endowed areas in Nigeria.

Beyond erroneous assumptions that oil equals an abundance of wealth, the Nigerian situation has remained largely a case of frustration, lamentation, and macabre irony. The discovery of the mineral resource has been blamed for ecological degradation of the Niger Delta region, as much as for the public office holder's reckless quest for business, and resulting corruption scandals, military coups, prolonged dictatorships, privatization of public resources, militarism, electoral fraud and unruly behavior, among military and civilian alike (Hill, 1999).

Unfortunately, the most tragic manifestation of the actual situation of the region is growing underdevelopment. In spite of occasional windfalls resulting from soaring prices in the international oil market, Nigeria's macroeconomic performance has been anything but outstanding. Actual present global reports ranked Nigeria as one of the poorest countries in the world with some states in the Niger Delta region ranking the poorest in the country. Poverty among indigenous women is so glaring to the extent some resorted to miniature jobs such as picking palm kernel shell for selling as a means of gas for cooking (UNDP, 2006).

EFFORTS AT TACKLING THE PROBLEMS OF THE NIGER DELTA

Various efforts are being made towards tackling the problems of the Niger Delta region and general poverty situation in the country. To take care of the region, the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) was established to provide a lasting solution to the socio-economic difficulties of the area which successive governments have grappled with even before independence. The NDDC has a clear mandate and vision to facilitate the rapid, even, and sustainable development of the Niger Delta region into an area that is economically prosperous, socially stable, ecologically regenerative, and politically peaceful. In order to achieve its mandate, the NDDC board identified its areas of focus to include: development of social and physical infrastructure, technology, economic revival and prosperity, ecological/environmental remediation and stability, human

development, pursuit of a peaceful environment under which tourism will thrive, and a buoyant culture that will be facilitated with economic activities.

THE NATIONAL POVERTY ERADICATION PROGRAM

In the year 2000, the National Poverty Eradication Program (NAPEP) was established to provide for eradication of absolute poverty in Nigeria by streamlining existing poverty alleviation institutions and coordinating implementation and monitoring of relevant schemes and programs at all levels of government (NAPEP Blue Print, 2001). NAPEP partners with state governments (including Niger Delta states) to fight poverty. The proposed mandates and targets for NAPEP as contained in the Blue Print (2001, p. 4) span the following:

- Youth Empowerment Scheme (YES)
- Rural Infrastructures Development Scheme (RIDS)
- Social Welfare Services Scheme (SQWESS)
- Natural Resource Development and Construction Scheme (NRDCS)

NAPEP collaborates with state governments and has diversified its projects from the proposed mandate to involve other interest groups and programs that were not initially mentioned in its interjectory activities like the Village Economic Development Solutions (VEDS) scheme (NAPEP Blue Print, 2001; VEDS NAPEP publication, 2007). Other poverty alleviation programs by federal and state governments are commercial bank poverty alleviation agencies such as the former People's Bank and the Family Economic Advancement Programs.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in Isoko, Ijaw and Itsekeri ethnic nationalities of Delta State of Nigeria. The sample of the study was randomly drawn from local government areas of the three ethnic nationalities. From each local government, 150 households were interviewed with the aid of an interview schedule. A wide range of information on socio-economic background was obtained. Descriptive statistics were used in analyzing responses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The results of the study are presented in tables below. The responses in Table 1 provide answers to a question on educational background of the respondents.

Table 1: Education

Educational System	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Informal Western School	338	75.11
Formal Western System	90	20
Formal Primary Education	22	4.88
Formal Secondary Education	0	-
Tertiary	0	-
Total	450	100

Source: Field Survey, 2010.

Out of 450 respondents, 338 (75.11%) attended the informal Western education system, which is very common in the study area. About 20% attended the formalized Western system of education which is becoming popular, while only 4.86% attended primary education. The bulk of women in the study area interviewed were married. This is shown by the responses in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Marital Status

Marital Status	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Single	80	17.78
Married	305	67.78
Widow	65	14.44
Total	450	100

Source: Field Survey, 2010.

Table 2 indicates most respondents (305, or 67.77%) are married. This is a typical characteristic of women in native societies in which marital bonds are encouraged in line with custom. Only 80 respondents (17.77%) are single, while the remaining 14.44% are widows. Family sizes are large in the study area. In a related question on the structure or family set-up of respondents, the following responses were obtained.

Table 3: Family Set-up

Family Types	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Extended Family	373	82.89
Nucleus Family	77	17.11
Total	450	100

Source: Field Survey, 2010.

Out of 450 respondents, 373 (82.89%) live in an extended family environment, while the remaining 77 (17.11%) are in a nucleus family. The traditional family set-up with large family size is predominant. Respondents involvement in economic activities to supplement family income is presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Involvement in Economic Activities

Economic Ventures	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Palm kennel	31	6.88
Weaving mart	120	26.66
Oil milling	133	29.55
Petty trading	110	24.44
Others	35	7.78
None	21	4.67
Total	450	100

Source: Field Survey, 2010.

Table 4 shows 95.33% of respondents are involved in either production or distribution of local palm kennel oil, weaving of traditional mart, bedspreads, oil milling, petty trading and others like hair plaiting, pot making, etc. All the above mentioned economic practices are undertaken within the home, while marketing is sometimes done outside the home. Only a negligible percentage (4.67%) of respondents reported they do not engage in any economic activity in the family.

No respondents collected loans from commercial banks or poverty alleviation agencies. The bulk (360, or 80%) reported their main source of capital is their husband/relatives, while 90 respondents (20%) said they finance ventures through personal savings. None benefitted from poverty alleviation schemes of the federal and state governments (Table 5). Reasons for not patronizing commercial banks and poverty alleviation agencies are given in Table 6.

Table 5: Sources of Capital of Respondents

Source of Capital	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Husband/Relatives	360	80
Commercial Banks	-	-
Co-operative Societies	-	-
Poverty Alleviation Agencies	-	-
Personal Savings	90	20
Total	400	100

Source: Field Survey, 2010.

Table 6: Reasons for Non Patronage of Commercial Banks/Poverty Alleviation Agencies

Reasons	Responses	Percentage (%)
No information	331	73.56
Collateral requirements	30	6.67
Interest (Riba)	76	16.67
Lack of confidence	13	2.89
Unspecified	-	
Total	450	100

Source: Field Survey, 2010.

Table 6 shows the bulk of the respondents (331) representing 73.56% had no information on the existence or the credit facilities granted by commercial banks and poverty alleviation agencies. This response is not surprising considering the high rate of illiteracy in the study area. About 17.75% of our respondents reported it is because of interest charged by the financial institutions that they could not approach them. Respondents were also asked whether the income earned is sufficient to sustain them. Their responses are presented in Table 7.

Table 7: Income Earned from Domestic Economic Activities

Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Much sufficient	23	5.11
Sufficient	59	13.11
Not at all	368	81.77
Total	450	100

Source: Field Survey, 2010.

Table 7 shows 81.77% of the respondents believe the income generated from domestic economic enterprises is not enough to supplement the family's income.

Only 5.11% are of the opinion the income generated is much sufficient to cater for the family's welfare.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study attempted to analyze the dynamics of poverty among the Niger Delta women in Isoko, Ijaw and Itsekiri ethnic Nationality of Delta State. The study revealed that most of the Niger Delta women are engaged in economic activity. However, most women later submitted that their earnings from such ventures are not enough to supplement their domestic consumption requirements. This shows the existence of widespread poverty among women in the study area.

The study revealed the activities of poverty alleviation agencies have not been felt by women in the study area. This was demonstrated by the large number of respondents (331) who reported they had no information on the existence of these agencies. Hence, they could not benefit from any packages. There is an urgent need for government to target policies directed at alleviating the poverty situation of women. Extra resources should be channeled into poor urban areas in order to help break the cycle of transmitted deprivation. Neighborhood-based action to work with local people should be implemented. The few educated women in such neighborhoods should be actively involved in such programs.

Government should encourage self-help projects among women. More cooperative associations should be formed among women to economically empower them. Educational and skill acquisition centers should be established in neighborhoods. Such centers should take care of the sensitivities of the local women population and adequate working tools and materials should be sold at subsidized rates to women's groups, while marketing outlets should be provided to easily dispose the output of such centers at favorable prices.

If the above recommendations are adequately taken into consideration, the level of poverty among the Niger Delta women in Delta State will be drastically reduced and their economic well-being greatly enhanced.

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