

STAKEHOLDERS' PERCEPTION OF IMPACT OF OIL EXPLORATION AND MEDIA INVOLVEMENT IN MITIGATING ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION IN SOUTH-SOUTH NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

RESEARCH ARTICLE

This study was conducted in order to find out how stakeholders in the South-South region of Nigeria perceive the impact of oil exploration on the environment in the region, and the role that the media can play in mitigating such impacts. The objectives of this study included to identify challenges faced by residents in South-South Nigeria due to oil exploration and environmental degradation in the region; and ascertain stakeholders' perception of the roles of the media in mitigating the impact of oil exploration and environmental degradation in South-South Nigeria. The study was anchored on Agenda Setting and Yale Persuasion Theories. The Focus Group Discussion method was adopted as the research design for the study. Findings of the study revealed that oil exploration and environmental degradation had negative impacts on the social, health and economic lives of the people in the South-South region of Nigeria. Findings also showed that the media have a tremendous role to play in mitigating these negative impacts, by creating awareness, as well as act both as environmental watchdog and advocate. The researchers recommended that the media should be more intentional in their report of the environment, as such intentional reportage would prompt proactive reporting of matters relating to oil exploration and environmental degradation.

KEYWORDS: Stakeholders' Perception, Impact of Oil Exploration, Media Involvement in Mitigating Environmental Degradation in South-South Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

The environment plays a critical role as far as the survival of living things, whether humans, plants or animals is concerned. James (2020), notes that the environment is classified into both physical and non-physical (psychological, social, political, economic) components.

While the later deals with the psychological tranquility, which is basically attached to the human's emotion, the physical environment comprised the air, the water and the land.

James, Ned and Sam (2024) state that the world is seriously challenged by global warming occasioned by the wearing away and/or perforation of the ozone layer, which provide the umbrella coverage that absorbs direct heat from the sun to planet earth. The emission of carbon monoxide into the atmosphere has been identified as a major factor that destroys the ozone. This, of course, has contributed immensely in the rising of ocean tides and causing flood, gully erosions and other associated disasters.

The South-South region of Nigeria is a petroleum hub. It has a large deposit of natural gas and fossil crude oil both onshore and offshore, which has placed Nigeria as the 6th largest oil producing nation in the world. Besides, the country is endowed with huge gas deposits. The exploration and exploitation of these resources are done in such a way that impacts the environment negatively. The flaring of gas, drilling and the spilling of oil, oil pipes vandalism, fire outbreaks, among several other activities associated with oil production, have left the region's environment in a terrible state of degradation, which has impacted on both the fauna and flora (James, Ned & Sam, 2024).

The impact of the degradation has also affected the psychological environment of the people in the geo-political zone. This, of course, has resulted in youth restiveness, kidnapping/abduction of oil workers, and other crimes witnessed in recent times.

According to Udofia (2023) the mass media wield a strong social force. The media set agenda and influence attitude change in the society. The right application of this force, and the corresponding positive responses from the government and major players in the oil and gas industry in the South-South region of Nigeria can engender positive attitudinal change toward mitigating and restoring the environment for the benefit of mankind.

Media environmental advocacy can create a pathway for cleaner and greener environment that will support healthy living, peace, and sustainable socio-economic development in the South-South region of Nigeria in particular, and the country at large. This, therefore, justifies the need for this study.

The study is premised on Agenda Setting, and Yale Persuasion Theories. The Agenda Setting Theory was postulated McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1968. According to Folarin (2002), the theory states that the mass media set the agenda for public discussion in the society. It further states that the media may not be successful in telling the people what to think, but that they are stunningly in telling the people what to think about.

The Yale Persuasion Theory states that behavioural change cannot occur in the society without attitudinal change, which can only be made possible if the source of a message is credible, the message itself is factual and persuasive. These two theories converge on the importance of the media in setting the agenda, and meeting the needs of members of the society. This can be applied if the media is involved in the mitigation of environmental degradation in the South-South region of Nigeria.

Statement of the Research Problems

The South-South region of Nigeria is blessed with natural resources such as oil, gas, fauna and flora, as well as human resources. However, the majority of the residents in this region, especially those residing in rural communities, remains very poor and insecure socially, economically, and politically, while the environment is unstable, as well as highly degraded

due to unwholesome practices that are going on, which are inimical and deleterious to the environment (James, Ned, & Sam, 2024).

More worrisome is the fact that upon the warning flags raised by environmental experts, civil society organisations, and the media, there is a sustained tempo of practices that cause environment degradation in the South-South region of Nigeria.

Research has shown that Nigeria is one of the top seven gas-flaring countries in the world. It is estimated that around two million people live less than four kilometers away from a flare site. Gas flared into the atmosphere contains greenhouse gases in addition to poisonous compounds such as dioxins, benzene, toluene, nitrogen and Sulphur-dioxide which cause fever, respiratory-related illness (especially among children), skin irritation, cancer, birth defect, reduced activity in immune system and also lead to death. Besides, the South-South region has lost much of her habitable environment due to environment degradation and pollution, (Moronkola, 2003).

Background checks reveal that not much studies have been done on the impacts of media in influencing stakeholders and residents alike to mitigate the impact of environmental degradations in the South-South region of Nigeria. Hence, this study is carried out to fill this gap. The concern that this study attempts to address is: what roles can the media play in the mitigation of environmental degradation in order to create a stable environment for the rejuvenation of socio-economic activities needed for the creation of wealth, peace and security in the region?

Objectives of the Study

The study has the following as its objectives, which included to:

- i. Find out how stakeholders in South-South Nigeria perceive the impact of oil exploration on the environment in the region;
- ii. identify challenges faced by residents in South-South Nigeria due to oil exploration and environmental degradation in the region;
- iii. ascertain stakeholders' perception of the roles of the media in mitigating the impact of oil exploration and environmental degradation in South-South Nigeria.

Research Questions

- i. How did stakeholders in South-South region of Nigeria perceive the impact of oil exploration on the environment in the region?
- ii. What were the challenges faced by residents in South-South Nigeria due to oil exploration and environmental degradation in the region?
- iii. What was stakeholders' perception of the roles of the media in mitigating the impact of oil exploration and environmental degradation in South-South Nigeria?

Literature Review

The Environment

The survival of living things (whether humans, animals or plants), and the performance and/or execution of any activity are done in the environment (James, 2019). This assertion conveys the importance of the environment for the survival of mankind. The term environment is derived from the French word "*Environia*" meaning to surround. In unveiling

it further, it has to do with both the abiotic (physical or non-living) and biotic (living) environment.

Many scholars have come up with possible definitions of the environment. For instance, the environment is seen as the sum total of all the living and non-living elements in the society, and their effects that influence human life. Consequently, while all living or biotic elements of the environment are animals, plants and humans, non-living or abiotic elements of the environment include water, land, sunlight, rocks and air (James, 2019).

Josh (2016) asserts that the word “environment” simply means surroundings in which organisms live. In this context, the environment, refers to the materials and forces that surround the living organism. Maler (1998) as cited in James (2019) defines environment as the condition, circumstance, and influence surrounding and affecting the development of an organism or a group of organisms. This, of course, alludes to the fact that organisms cannot exist in the absence of environment.

Ayantayo (2004) sees the environment as a collection of natural and artificial arrangements in which humanity is completely dependent on for survival and subsistence through food, water and shelter. Therefore, man depends solely on the environment for the provisions of materials for his survival. Olatunyi (2002) as quoted by Nwebueze and Chinyere (2007) posits that the environment is an all-embracing concept involving all the factors that comprise the planet earth and its surrounding. According to him, man’s environment includes the land unto which he is born, lives and dies; the water he drinks; and the air he breathes. Therefore, man is both a product and a shaper of his environment.

Putting all the concepts together, it is clear that man and environment are the different sides of the same coin. While the environment provides both the space or surrounding for man to live in, and also provides the necessities for his survival, man, in turn, recreates and reshapes the environment for the perpetuation of his survival.

Media

Media are the platforms or means of communication. Sometimes the term “media” is associated with the press. Mass media is the conglomeration of various media of mass communication. According to Enahoro (2002), no society survives without communication and/or mass media. Enahoro, citing UNESCO (1981) states that communication maintains and animates life. It is also the motor and expression of social activity and civilisation; it leads people and people from instinct to inspiration, through variegated process and system of enquiry; command and control.

It creates a common pool of ideas, strengthens the feeling of togetherness through exchange of messages and translates thought into action, inflecting every emotion and need from the humblest task of human survival to supreme manifestation of creativity or destruction. Communication integrates knowledge, organisation and power and runs as a thread linking the earliest memory of man to his noblest aspirations through constant striving for a better life. However, unless some basic structural changes are introduced, the potential benefits of technological and communication development will hardly be put at the disposal of the majority of mankind.

McLuhan (1964) McLuhan’s arguments of media of communication are vast social metaphors that not only transmit information, but determine what is knowledge, that not only orient us to the world, but tells us what kind of world exists, that not only excite and delight

our senses, but alter the ratio of sensory equipment which we use to actually change our character. The mass media basically perform functions such as information, education, entertainment and transmission of values, enlightenment and surveillance of the environment.

The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999) as amended, having had a clear understanding of the functions of the mass media, in Section 22, assigns the media with the roles of holding government to account. The Section provides that “the press (newspaper), radio, television, and other agencies of the mass media shall, at all times, be free to uphold the fundamental objectives contained in this chapter and uphold the responsibility and accountability of Government to the people.”

Environmental Degradation

Environmental degradation is the continuous devaluing or harming of the environment naturally or through human activities. James (2022) points out the various ways through which the environment is degraded. These include desert encroachment, earthquake, landslide, flood, gully etc. Also, molten lava arising as the result of earthquake can degrade the environment. Again, unfavourable weather condition can cause drought that adversely impact the environment.

Ayantayo (2004), on the other hand, notes that human activities such as mining, exploration and drilling of oil, felling of trees (deforestation), indiscriminate disposal of refuse, open defecation, unhealthy agricultural practices such as over grazing, bush burning – are all potential means of environmental degradation. Degradation of the environment affects the air, land and waters. It also has far-reaching negative impacts on human health and survival (Akpan, 2014).

Methodology

The study adopted the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) method to gather data from stakeholders in Mkpanak Community (an oil producing community) in Ibeno Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State. Data were gathered in order to investigate the stakeholders’ perception of the impact of oil exploration on the environment in the South-South region of Nigeria; and to also ascertain their perception toward the role of the mass media in mitigating the impact of environmental degradation in the region.

Members in the FGD panel included community and youth leaders, a community women leader, a member of the village council, a teacher in the community secondary school, a local fisherman, a trader in the community market, a farmer in the community, and a representative of one of the oil servicing firms operating in the community.

Discussion of Findings

Research Question One: How did stakeholders in South-South region of Nigeria perceive the impact of oil exploration on the environment in the region?

All stakeholders in the Focus Group Discussion panel were unanimous on the issue concerning the impact of oil exploration in the region. Specifically, some of the discussants narrated personal experiences and the general impact of oil exploration in their local communities to include pollution of the source of their drinking water, death of fish and other aquatic life, destruction of their farmland due to oil spillage. The Second Discussant on the panel particularly stated that the river has changed so much due to oil exploration. The river which used to be very clear and clean, is now always murky, with oil on the surface of the

water. The amount of fish in the river has also reduced drastically. He further added that the community wakes up a number of times to see dead fishes floating on the river, and that when the fishermen catch fishes, they sometimes smell like kerosene.

Discussant Four stated that even palm trees in the community are gradually dying off. He further noted that the village used to be very green and thick with bushes everywhere, but that nowadays many parts of the community look like dry season all year round.

The implication of these findings is that all aspects of the environment including land, water, and air are affected by oil exploration in the South-South region of Nigeria, as gas flaring affect the air, while oil spillage affect both water (including aquatic life), and land (including the flora and fauna).

These findings are supported by Nwebueze and Chinyere (2007) posits that the environment is an all-embracing concept involving all the factors that comprise the planet earth and its surrounding. Man's environment includes the land unto which he is born, lives and dies; the water he drinks; and the air he breathes.

The findings are further buttressed by Ayantayo (2004), who states that human activities such as mining, exploration and drilling of oil, felling of trees (deforestation), indiscriminate disposal of refuse, open defecation, unhealthy agricultural practices such as over grazing, bush burning, are all likely ways through which environmental degradation can occur.

Research Question Two: What were the challenges faced by residents in South-South Nigeria due to oil exploration and environmental degradation in the region?

Findings pertaining to this question revealed that the challenges faced by residents in the region ranged from economic, to social, to health. Specifically, they narrated that due to oil exploration and its attendant degradation of the environment, the sources of their livelihood are affected. For instance, Discussant Seven noted that due to the negative effects of oil exploration on the environment, many youths have had to leave the communities to the cities in search of jobs, which sometimes are not there. He further added that such migration has pushed many of them to venture into dangerous and hazardous activities such as oil bunkering, and illegal refining of petroleum products; adventures have shortened their lifespan.

Findings relating to the health implication of oil exploration and environmental degradation on the residents in the region, according to the Third Discussant in the FGD panel, showed that the cases of chronic cough, asthma, as well as skin rashes have almost doubled because of increased gas flaring due to oil exploration. Unfortunately, children are the ones who suffer the most. She further added that the communities have also witnessed increased number of miscarriages among the women.

These findings are supported by Moronkola (2003) who stated that gas flared into the atmosphere contains greenhouse gases, in addition to poisonous compounds such as dioxins, benzene, toluene, nitrogen and sulphur-dioxide which cause fever, respiratory-related illness (especially among children), skin irritation, cancer, birth defect, reduced activity in immune system and also lead to death. Besides, the South-South region has lost much of her habitable environment due to environment degradation and pollution.

Research Question Three: What was stakeholders' perception of the roles of the media in mitigating the impact of oil exploration and environmental degradation in South-South Nigeria?

All the stakeholders were unanimous in their belief that the mass media can play significant roles in mitigating the impact of oil exploration and environmental degradation in the South-South region of the country. Some of the ways they enumerated included the mass media mobilising the general public for action, as well as holding key actors in the oils sector accountable on issues pertaining to the environment. They also agreed that the mass media can promote environmental literacy by teaching people how to reduce environmental pollution, conserve energy and natural resources, and monitor changes in their local communities.

Interestingly, Discussant Nine in the FGD panel stated that the mass media can help to reduce the impact of oil exploration on the environment by advocating and setting the agenda for the public. They could keep the issues of environmental degradation constantly in the public domain through consistent reportage. Reporting environmental degradation issues repeatedly can push such issues unto political agenda, and that can influence lawmakers to pass or enforce laws and regulations to protect the environment. The media can also help to amplify the voices of the communities by giving members of the affected communities the platforms through which they can share their stories directly to members of the public.

Additionally, Discussant Two stated that the media can actually serve as the watchdog to the environment by holding oil servicing firms and government accountable. The media can investigate and expose cover-ups, negligence, and/or weak enforcement of environmental laws. They can also do follow-ups on remediation projects promised by both oil servicing companies and the government in order to find out if such projects are actually carried out.

More so, Discussant Five noted that the media can help to shape the cultural attitudes of the people toward the environment by shifting the perception, and changing their mindset from thinking that degrading the environment is “normal” and inevitable. Members of the communities could be made to understand that any practice that can cause any kind of damage to the environment is bad and can be prevented. Such a “shifted” mindset would help the people to always look out for, and to ultimately protect the environment.

The implication of this assertion is that the mass media can perform significantly well by ensuring that issues of oil exploration and environmental degradation are constantly mentioned for public awareness.

These findings are supported by the Agenda Setting Theory of the mass media used as one of the anchors for this study. According to this theory the mass media set the agenda for public discussion in the society. They may not be successful in telling the people what to think, but they are stunningly successful in telling the people what to think about.

The findings of this study are also buttressed by Yale Persuasion Theory, which states that behavioural change cannot occur in the society without attitudinal change, which can only be made possible if the source of a message is credible, and the message itself is factual and persuasive.

Conclusion

From the findings of the study, it is safe to conclude that there is a negative impact of oil exploration and environmental degradation in the South-South region of Nigeria. The

rationale behind coming to this conclusion is that all the stakeholders attested to this fact. Oil exploration and environmental degradation impact the social, health and economic lives of the people.

Also, the media have a tremendous role to play if this negative impact is to be mitigated. They (the media) can create awareness, as well as act both as environmental watchdog and advocate. It is only when the media intensify their effort in reporting issues pertaining to oil exploration and environmental degradation that the society would benefit maximally, and the environment would be better protected.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are advanced:

- i. Residents in the South-South region of Nigeria are advised to be more aware of what is going on within their immediate environment. Such awareness would help them to notice the changes that have occurred in their surroundings, and could help them to raise alarm where necessary.
- ii. Government and oil servicing companies operating in the South-South region of Nigeria are urged to take decisive actions to remediate the negative impact of oil exploration in this region. They can do this by building and equipping medical facilities to take care of the health needs of the people.
- iii. The media are hereby advised to be more intentional in their report of the environment. Such intentional reportage would prompt them to be proactive in the way they report matters concerning the issues bordering on oil exploration and environmental degradation.

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