
Underdevelopment, Development and the Future of Africa



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Munyaradzi Mawere**

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The Future of Africa**

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1

**Africa's Political Challenge: The
Politics and Resilience of Underdevelopment..... 1**

Munyaradzi Mawere

Chapter 2

**Hearing the Footfalls of Humanoid Robots:
Technoscience, (Un-)employment and the Future
of "Development" in Twenty-First Century Africa..... 15**

Artwell Nhemachena

Chapter 3

**China for Africa, Africa for China or Africa and
China for Each Other? Assessing Chinese
Development Collaboration for African
Transformations..... 61**

Thomas Fox

Chapter 4

**Logical Fallacies in African Development
Debates...117**

Ephraim Taurai Gwaravanda

Chapter 5

**Breaking the Barriers to Africa's Development?
The Prospects, Opportunities and Challenges of
China's Approach to Development in Africa.....141**

Richard Asante

Chapter 6

**"Let My People Go!" A Contextual Reading of the
Book of Exodus in Light of Political and Economic
Crisis in Post-independent Zimbabwe..... 169**

Nyasha Madzokere

Chapter 7	
"Poverty in the Midst of Plenty":	
A Study of Poverty and Underdevelopment in the	
Niger Delta Region of Nigeria.....	191
<i>Odeigah, Theresa Nfam</i>	
Chapter 8	
"Jungle" Education Curriculum and Language	
of Instruction as Hindrances to the	
Development of Science and Technology in Africa:	
Insights from Nigeria.....	213
<i>Okewande Esther Oyenibe</i>	
Chapter 9	
Indigenous Epistemologies, Disasters and Development:	
In Search of Africa-based Mechanisms for Disaster	
Risk Reduction and Socio-economic Development.....	239
<i>Munyaradzi Mawere</i>	
Chapter 10	
Africa and the Remedies to the Problem of	
Underdevelopment.....	251
<i>Muhammed A. Yinusa, Joseph A. Oluyemi, Raji Abdullateef</i>	
Chapter 11	
Poverty, Natural Resources "Curse" and	
Underdevelopment in Africa.....	279
<i>Takavafira Masarira Zhou</i>	
Chapter 12	
Language for National Integration, Unity and	
Development in Nigeria.....	347
<i>J.O. Friday-Otun</i>	

"Poverty in the Midst of Plenty": A Study of Poverty and Underdevelopment in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria

Odeigah, Theresa Nfam

Introduction

Niger Delta Region of Nigeria is endowed with abundant natural and human resources which explains its enormous economic potentials. Political independence held out bright prospects of sustained economic development and prosperity for the region and the country at large. Ironically, the region has lagged behind other oil producing states in the world, in terms of economic development and self-empowerment of the people in the region¹. A combination of factors account for this unsavoury situation namely, poor leadership and governance, imperial history, human and property insecurity, insurgency, terrorism, vandalism, neo-colonialism, endemic corruption, neglect of agriculture, criminality and a general lack of infrastructural development, among others.

Since the era of the trans-Atlantic slave trade through today, the Nigerian economy has been perpetually under the "bondage" of the developed Western economies, serving two primary purposes for them². These are serving as a source of raw materials for Western industries; and a market for the disposal of the West's manufactured goods. Attempts to integrate the Niger Delta economy to the global economy, have led to more pauperisation of the Niger Delta and greater external dependency of the Nigerian economy. This is a replica of what is happening at a continental level. Such a scenario has led to, in most cases, growth without development, in fact "mesmerising growth". This is because African-European relations have been grossly unequal and skewed against Africa³. One telling result of this is that since the 1980s especially, poverty has not only

spread but also deepened in Africa in relative and absolute terms. Extant statistics does not give much room for optimism. How to get the continent out of its current miasma of poverty is a legitimate subject for historical and hermeneutical inquiry. This chapter attempts to unravel this matter using multi-disciplinary approach and the case study of the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria to tackle the problem and proffer solutions to this menace.

The Niger Delta Region

The Niger Delta Region of Nigeria covers an area of about 70,000 square kilometres and is seen as the largest wetland in Africa⁴. This wetland area is made up of 36,000 square kilometres of creeks, mangrove lagoons and other natural resources. The region is rich because it is endowed with abundant natural resources and economic potentials. It has however remained one of the least developed areas in Nigeria because of a combination of factors like the destruction of ecosystem by the multinational oil corporations. The states that made up the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria are Abia, Akwa-Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo and Rivers. The majority of the ethnic groups in this region are made up of the Efike, Ibo, Ijaw, Ibibio, Urhobo, Itsekiri, Boki and Isoko, among other communities⁵.

The Niger Delta Region of Nigeria is one of the most important coastal marine ecosystems in Africa. The region also has massive crude oil deposits which foreign companies have been exploring and exploiting for several decades now. This region is one of the most important economic reservoirs in both the national and global economy. The exploration of crude oil has assisted the Nigerian government with some development that had taken place mainly in other parts of Nigeria, but not necessarily in the Niger Delta Region. Crude oil also has been the main source of revenue to the Nigerian government and therefore the golden goose of Nigeria⁶. The question that remains mind-boggling about this region is: "Why the region is poor in the midst of plenty?"

External factors responsible for poverty and underdevelopment in the Niger Delta Region

As previously alluded to, there are a lot of factors responsible for poverty and underdevelopment in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria and these can be looked at from the perspectives of internal and external factors. External factors can be seen from the point of view of industrialised countries of Europe dominating the so-called less developed countries economically, politically and socially, because of the economic and political interest of the European countries in the region right from inception. Because of the economic potentials of the Niger Delta Region, the European countries had developed a lot of interest in the area. This is part of the reasons why the area has remained backward and deeply impoverished⁷.

Transatlantic slave trade

Poverty and underdevelopment in the midst of abundance in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria could be traced to as far back as the arrival of the Europeans in 1444 in Africa. The Europeans domination and operations in the Niger Delta Region since the 15th century had made the indigenous economy rudimentary and stagnated. Right from the time of the slave trade to the legitimate trade era, the Niger Delta Region was dominated by the Europeans. The trans-Atlantic slave trade caused the forced movement of millions of Africans to Europe so as to provide labour on their plantations. The category of people that were moved from the Niger Delta area during this period were not the weak or frail individuals, but rather, the strong, able-bodied men and women who were capable of developing the society. The forceful movement of men and women from the Niger Delta Region during the slave trade era to Europe imposed a heavy threat to the economic growth of the region, at least considering the number of people who were forcefully moved away. Poverty and underdevelopment in the Niger Delta Region, thus, can be looked at in two broad perspectives as internal and external. Many scholars have attributed underdevelopment in Africa to colonialism, slave trade, neo-colonialism, bad leadership, crime, illiteracy among others⁸. Walter Rodney in his infamous text:

How Europe Underdeveloped Africa underlined that a combination of factors ranging from economic to political contributed to Africa's underdevelopment⁹. Some scholars have argued that underdevelopment in Africa can be traced back to the era of slave trade and colonialism, because during the slave trade, Africa lost a lot of able-bodied men and women. The political setting, economic base, social structure and cultural beliefs were devastated by the colonialists. It is estimated that about 12million people were taken across the Atlantic Ocean to work in plantations and industries during the industrial revolution in Europe¹⁰. The European subjugation and oppression in Africa was one of the factors of poverty and underdevelopment in Africa. Rodney also agree that colonialism is one of the causes of underdevelopment and that the Europeans that came to Africa had a major motive, which was mainly exploitative¹¹

One of the major external factors contributing to poverty and underdevelopment in the Niger Delta Region has been the presence of the Multinational Oil Companies in the area. Some of these multinational oil corporations like Agip, Exxon Mobil, Shell, and Chevron, among others, are still operational in the region. While one can say the discovery of crude oil in the Niger Delta Region would have been a blessing, it has become a curse, because basic amenities such as good roads, hospitals, schools, electricity supply and employment opportunities are lacking in the region where such an important resource – oil is found in abundance. The multinational oil companies have been operating and generating billions of dollars to the detriment of their host communities. Most of the people of the Niger Delta Region are living in abject poverty¹². The multinational oil corporations are agents of imperialism and most of the activities are not beneficial to their host communities. It is also pertinent to note that in the pre- colonial and colonial periods, the Niger Delta people were noted for farming agricultural products such as palm oil and fishing besides salt production. The environmental quality is fundamental to the overall livelihood and development of the people. Pollution of the atmosphere, water and land in the Niger Delta Region through oil exploration, gas flaring, dumping of toxic wastes and environmental degradation have destroyed the land and rendered

the people's agricultural pursuits unproductive¹³. The petroleum industry in the Niger Delta Region is the main source of Nigeria's foreign exchange earnings and this has kept the economy vibrant and bouffant, this also accounts for over 90 per cent of the total foreign exchange revenue to the country. Nigeria is the 7th largest oil producer in the world and indeed the largest in Africa. Sadly, despite the importance of oil and gas to the Nigerian economy, the Niger Delta Region has witnessed many years of neglect by the government and the multinational oil companies, making the region undeveloped and even poorer¹⁴.

The developed countries of the world control the region indirectly through their companies resulting to lack of development, economic and political dependency. More often than not, the Multinational Oil Corporations are involved indirectly in the politics of the region because they influence opinion and also can give financial support to their chosen candidates for political office. The Multinationals do not support government that is very critical of them and can indirectly remove a government that is hostile to them and their interests. Through this corrupt gimmick, the multinational oil corporations have underdeveloped the Niger Delta Region through massive oil spillage and gas flaring that have systematically destroyed the ecosystem, making agricultural pursuits almost impossible¹⁵. In the Niger Delta Region, the water is also polluted as a result of chemical wastes. This has in turn destroyed aquatic life, and in addition to that, causing ill health to the inhabitants of the region. Oil explorations activities in the region have been known to cause ill health, reduced life expectancy for the inhabitants and have also necessitated relocation of some communities to other safer areas¹⁶.

The Europeans did not only plunder African's resources, but also destroyed the local thriving indigenous economy of the Niger Delta Region. In the Niger Delta Region, despite several oil spillages that destroyed the ecosystem of the area, no adequate compensation has even been given to the local people. This is unacceptable in other countries with similar problems, because the government or corporate bodies have adequate arrangement for any problem that may occur. For example, after the oil spill in Prince William Sound

Alaska in 1989, ExxonMobil Company spent about 5 billion USD on cleaning up the environment hazards and also paid physical compensation to the host communities. In the Niger Delta Region where oil spillage has destroyed the ecosystem and indigenous occupations like agriculture among others, not much attention and compensation have been paid to this important region. It is only recently that the new Nigerian government has just instituted a massive plan to clean up the Niger Delta environment and this is coming more than four years after the United Nations Environmental Programme suggested a master plan to clean up the Niger Delta environment¹⁷.

One of the factors that have contributed to the underdevelopment of the Niger Delta Region is neo-colonialism through the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. International Monetary fund and World Bank are the two institutions structure to give assistance to mostly poor countries, but they are now been used to underdeveloped countries. Neo-colonialism is an ideology that was introduced in the twentieth century. This can also be seen as the continuation of an economic model of colonialism after a colonised territory has achieved formal political independence¹⁸. These agencies like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have been used to render African Countries undeveloped. This is because when countries are given loans with extreme conditionalities, economic, political power and influence by the loan recipients are ceded to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or the World Bank. Even when some countries in Africa have not taken IMF loans like Nigeria, it is also known that the IMF and the World Bank will restructure the economies of such African countries in a way to tie them to the apron strings of the developed nations¹⁹. The World Bank, initially known as rehabilitation and development bank was formed for the rebuilding of infrastructure and capital projects in low and medium income to countries as well as to promote trade co-existence. The mission of the World Bank is to reduce extreme poverty and boost economic prosperity through policy prescription and execution, but today the World Bank and the IMF have brought massive poverty to a lot of poor African countries and increased their dependency on

the West. It is also pertinent to note that Nigeria's economy is still to a large extent tied to the apron strings of the Europeans. Most manufactured goods being produced by some of the developed countries like China and Britain are being marketed in Nigeria and other African countries even though some of the basic raw materials are from Africa. This has made Nigeria like other African countries a consumer nation and therefore stifling improvement of the local technology²⁰.

Climate change

Climate change, is also affecting the Niger Delta region like other parts of the world. According to Nasiru, climate change is an increase in the average global temperature. Human activities and events are contributing to the increase in the global temperatures. In Nigeria as well as the Niger Delta Region, the negative impact of global warming can be seen particularly in the agricultural sector arising from climatic deterioration. Flooding is common in the Niger Delta and in Nigeria as a whole resulting in gully erosion and destruction of farmlands. Flooding has destroyed communities, farmlands and the ecosystem generally and this over the years has negatively affected the economy of the people²¹.

Internal factors responsible for poverty and underdevelopment in the Niger Delta Region

Indigenous exploitation

The Niger Delta Region with its abundant natural resources has been witnessing an increasing level of poverty as a result of indigenous Exploitation. Many factors have contributed to this menace in the region. The concept of indigenous exploitation of the Niger Delta Region cannot be over emphasized. Exploitation was a word used to describe the unjust treatment of the Africans by the Europeans but today, African leaders are now playing the same role the Europeans played in Africa during the colonial period, if not worse²². Indigenous exploitation can be said to be the root cause of the various kinds of exploitation that have engulfed the region as well as Nigeria as a whole. Indigenous exploitation in Nigeria has always

been blamed on the Europeans, however, since 1960 when Nigeria got her independence, there has been the perception that Nigerian leaders have been the major exploiters of the country's resources and that leadership has been the mechanism used to exploit the country's resources. Nigerian leaders are to some extent, largely tied and embedded in a systematic form of taking national wealth and diverting government funds into their private accounts because of greed and self-ambition.

Poor governance

Poor governance can be said to be the breeding ground for poverty in the region, because people aspire and get into leadership positions not with the desire of improving the living conditions of the people, but rather to enrich themselves at the expense of the masses. The Niger Delta Region with its abundant natural resources has witnessed a lot of poverty and underdevelopment. It is no longer news that due to bad leadership and massive corruption by the Niger Delta leaders, the region has remained in abject poverty. The leaders, because of their flamboyant lifestyle have made the people not only to see corruption as fashionable activity but also a good way to enjoy several privileges. The expectation of the Nigerian citizenry was very high when Nigeria embraced democratic system in 1999 after several attempts in the past²³. It was generally believed that with the coming in of democracy, a lot of problems would be solved like unemployment, insecurity and absence of the rule of law. Nigeria for example had enjoyed oil boom in the past, but the leaders failed to save for periods when oil prices fell and to judiciously use the windfalls from high oil prices to develop crucial sectors like education, agriculture, health, power and transportation.

Corruption

Corruption is a fraudulent conduct by those who use power or leadership positions to embezzle public funds for their personal use²⁴. This is a major impediment to the development of the Niger Delta Region and it is indeed a major challenge hindering development in the whole country. The menace has been linked to the government conniving with the multinational oil corporations to deny the people

their rights and benefits, thereby contributing to the staggering growth of development in the area. The root cause of corruption in the Niger Delta lies in the fact that the leaders view government funds and property as their new devices of acquiring their own share of the national cake. This corruption is all-pervading and has affected all sectors like the economy, the political and the social life of the people. It is unfortunate that several anti-corruption agencies set by government, like the Corrupt Practices Decree of 1975 which was promulgated by the regime of Murtala / Obasanjo, War Against Indiscipline by Buhari/ Idiagbon regime, Code of Conduct Bureau of 1990, Advanced Fee Fraud and other related offences of 1995, Independent Corrupt Practices and other Related Offences Commission ICPC and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission EFCC, have not been able to curb corruption in the Niger Delta and in Nigeria as a whole. Several government projects have been abandoned like construction of roads, health, refineries, water project and uncompleted government buildings. These abandoning projects are due to corruption by government officials. In the Niger Delta region government officials see it as a common habit in siphoning government funds into their private accounts in foreign banks. There is a very high level of corruption in governance which has brought poverty in the land. The impact of corruption has been mainly on the ordinary citizens resulting in poverty and underdevelopment²⁵.

The problem of godfatherism in Nigerian politics, is another form of political corruption that has destroyed good governance in Nigeria and the region. Godfathers are men and women with enormous financial and political influence to determine who gets nominated to contest an election, and who eventually wins and gets top political positions. For instance Chief Olusegun Obasanjo the former Nigeria President was godfather to Dr Goodluck Jonathan when he became governor of Bayelsa state in the Niger Delta region and Chief Chris Uba was a political godfather to Dr Chris Ngige of Anambra State in Nigeria. This has led to most leaders failing to achieve their primary objective of coming to serve in the region. Nigeria's political class are only after personal aggrandisement and not development. It is another evil way of corruption, godfather

always has much influence in the socio-economic and political will of a nation ²⁶.

The problems of mono product economy

Another internal factor that has contributed to poverty and underdevelopment in the Niger Delta Region is "mono-economy". The non-diversification of the Niger Delta economy has rendered the Niger Delta economy undeveloped. The Niger Delta Region is one of the most important regions in the world, with massive natural oil and gas reserves of great economic potentials. Before crude oil was discovered in 1956 in the Niger Delta Region, the region was known for agriculture, salt production and fishing. Palm oil was one of the most important crops before the discovery of oil in the region and it is an indigenous crop that has always contributed to the development of the area till the advent of exploration of crude oil²⁷. Palm oil plantations were grown in abundance in the hinterland and the coastal areas as well. There was no component of the palm tree that was not economically viable as palm trees were good in the production of palm oil, brooms and palm kernels, and some of these items were used domestically and externally. Some of these components of the palm trees were used in the production of pomades and soap, while the oil was a very important and necessary ingredient for preparing soups of various kinds in the region and beyond. The kernels shell was used for fuelling firewood and the shaft and husks saved as illuminates among other things. The Niger Delta Region produced several thousand tons of palm oil and the palm oil export from the region is said to have risen from 4700 tons in 1827 to 13,945 tons in 1845 and export of palm oil reached as far as 25000 tons, and at the end of the century the volume had increased tremendously²⁸.

However, during the colonial and postcolonial periods, the region suddenly neglected its agricultural heritage and followed what was believed to be the "new" and "fashionable" trend of depending on oil for the survival of the region. Thus, over the years there has been no improvement in agriculture, no new technology has been added to what was obtained in the past. Agriculture was abandoned and it remained stagnated because all the attention was focused on

crude oil to the extent that even the young school leavers have been orientated to believe only in white collar jobs in the rich oil companies. This is despite the fact that these so-called "cream jobs" are no more forthcoming resulting in a lot of youth restiveness, unemployment, poverty, violence and criminality in the region²⁹. Further, it is worth noting that in the Niger Delta Region, fishing was a highly skilled occupation for both men and women. People from Oron, Calabar, and the Urhobos, among many other communities, were all involved in fishing activities. Fishing activities were so important to the extent that the culture of the Ijaws, permitted a new born baby to be taken to the stream and dipped in water, allowed to float for a few seconds, as a sign that every child born of the Ijaw community had to be acquainted with water and swimming right from birth. The Ijaws lived on fishing and salt production, because the ecosystem was not suitable for arable farming and food cropping. In 1508, a Portuguese sea captain, soldier, explorer and also a cartographer, Pachecho Pereira visited the region and reported that the Ijaws exported fish and salt to the hinterland areas in exchange for agricultural produce³⁰. All these occupations were vibrant and businesses took place peacefully and poverty was well managed until the time the activities of the multinational oil corporations destroyed, the ecosystem and the fishing business in the region. Since then, the Niger Delta Region economy has never again been diversified because the oil companies have primarily dominated the economy with their foreign partners. This is the main source of foreign exchange in Nigeria with 75 percent the Nigerian's revenue gotten from crude oil. Sadly, even developing infrastructural facilities in the region have proved difficult. That is why the region found itself in poverty and deprivation despite enormous natural resources. With the rate of oil spillage, the ecosystem is no longer fertile for the production of indigenous crops³¹.

Political instability and lack of continuity in governance

After 1960 the first few years of independence and democracy, governance in Nigeria was dominated by the military rule in 1966 with a coup d'état that over threw the Prime Minister Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa. Nigeria witnessed several corrupt military regimes

that came to power through coup-d'état promising to do better than the government they overthrew. Military regimes by their very nature are prone to corruption, dictatorship and making of empty promises, yet military rule could not address basic issues of governance and this further impoverished the Niger Delta Region³².

Many poverty alleviation programmes have been instituted since 1972 like the National Accelerated Food Production Programme, the Nigeria Agricultural and Co-operative Bank and the Operation Feed the Nation in 1976, aimed at teaching and empowering the rural framers on how to use new technological tools and techniques in farming. The National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) of 2001 was designed to boost and sustain poverty alleviation in Nigeria, but all these programmes failed woefully because of poor leadership and massive corruption³³.

Insecurity and criminality

Insecurity and criminality in the 21st century has become a major issue in Africa and Nigeria especially with the new wave of insurgency in Nigeria. Insecurity in this general sense means when there is no adequate guard or protection in the society³⁴. This could be in the form of job, economic, food, political, financial or social insecurity to mention a few. No matter what form of insecurity a state might have, the genesis is usually traceable to bad governance³⁵. In Nigeria the Boko Harm and the Niger Delta militants have worsened the state of insecurity and criminality. The rising new wave of violent crimes and the associated widespread insecurity in the Niger Delta region and indeed the entire Nigeria has become worrisome³⁶. The pervading poverty and underdevelopment in the Niger Delta Region can also be attributed to insecurity and increased crime rate in Nigeria. Nigeria has become a ravaged by insecurity and crime which have extended to other part of Nigeria like the Niger Delta Region, and this has become worrisome. The region has witnessed many cases of kidnapping, pipeline vandalism, terrorism, armed robbery, murder, human trafficking, rape, cyber fraud, and oil theft. Unemployed youths are used as thugs to cause electoral violence and mayhem during elections. Due to the large number of unemployed youths, politicians are known to have taken advantage of poverty in

the region to recruit them as political thugs. This has fuelled high level of insecurity and criminality in the region. Due to the failure of the law enforcement agencies to curtail the problem, many oil companies have stopped production and some have even moved out of the region further worsening the unemployment situation. The oil corporations that are still operating in the Niger Delta Region are producing at low capacity and no new investments are being made in the oil and gas industry because of the very hostile business environment. Nigeria daily oil production has reduced by over 800,000 barrels per day from an average of 2.2 million barrels per day, because of insecurity, criminality and especially increased of crude oil pipelines vandals in the Niger Delta Region ³⁷. Youth restiveness has metamorphosed into proliferation of arms and the emergence of militia groups that have constituted a threat to the region and the country at large ³⁸. According to Balabola, the struggle for revenue allocation formula is a manifestation of a collective sense of deprivation on the part of the people whom themselves are producers of the entire federation's wealth. It should however be noted that in the Niger Delta Region, the oil exploration activities have a profound negative impact on the domestic economy. Exploration and exploitation of the region right from 1956 has resulted in environmental degradation, poverty and unemployment. Many individuals have lost their lives and farmlands because of the installations of equipment for the production of oil and gas³⁹. Most of the unemployed youths do not have marketable skills due to a poorly structured educational system and even attempt to retrain these youths for engagement in the agricultural sector has been rebuffed severally because of the wrong perception that they can only be successful in life by working in rich oil corporations⁴⁰. Many attempts have been made by the federal government of Nigeria to develop the Niger Delta Region by establishing some agencies, such as the Niger Delta Development Board formed in 1960, the Niger Delta Basin Development Authority (NDBDA) formed in 1976, the Oil Mineral Producing Area Development Commission (OMPADEC) formed in 1992, the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) formed in 2000, and the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs formed in 2008. President Yar'Adua, for example,

created the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs in September 2008 to specifically support development in the region⁴¹. According to the then Nigerian president, the Ministry was the last attempt by government to find a lasting solution to the problem in the Niger Delta Region ranging from poverty, underdevelopment, environmental degradation and unemployment, among others⁴². Between 1985 and 1993, the military regime of Ibrahim Babangida increased the derivation funds from 1.5 per cent to 3 per cent of the total oil revenue to be given to oil producing states. All these were to a large extent white elephant projects because there was no proper funding and political will power to see these projects through. Insincerity on the part of government, bad leadership, mismanagement, misappropriation of funds and corruption rendered the region undeveloped⁴³.

Recommendations

One of the most important interventions that the Federal Government of Nigeria could put in place to bring about development in the Niger Delta Region is to have and implement an agreement with the multinational oil and gas companies on how to protect the environment to reduce the negative impact of their exploration activities on their host communities.

Government should enforce rules and regulation on oil spill and make the Multinational Oil Cooperation responsible and accountable for their actions. The multinational oil companies should be mandated to sign agreements with the host communities in respect of employing the youths of their host communities. The Multinational Oil Companies should keep cordial relation with their host communities and to improve communication among them.⁴⁴

Adequate compensation should be paid to the communities by the multinational oil corporations and such funds should be judiciously utilise in providing infrastructure such as roads, portable water, schools and health centres among others.

The indigenous people should be made stakeholders in the oil business so as to protect the national assets of the country. It is appropriate for indigenous people to given employment in top

management position and to also to receive salary in dollars. Most decisions in the oil companies should be made by the indigenous people.

Different skills should be introduced to the youths and training schools should also be established to curb youth restiveness and criminality in the region. This will help the empowerment programme to better the lives of the people. Rehabilitation for the female unemployed youths who are being trafficked as sex slaves across international boundaries and also the rehabilitation of the various armed groups. Implementation of amnesty programmes for all the militant youth who are addicted to criminal activities and prostitution

Corruption in all ramifications should be genuinely addressed to ensure that funds for economic growth and development of the Eastern Niger Delta area are judiciously used for the welfare of the citizens.

All anti corrupt agencies like Independent Corrupt Practices and other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) should be transparent.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Niger Delta region of Nigeria despite its enormous oil and gas reserves that is the main foreign exchange earner for the country has suffered neglect from various government regimes in Nigeria. Poor leadership, corruption, pipeline vandalism and the resulting increase in the wave of crime and criminality in the region have further impoverished the region and its people. The neglect of agriculture and the abandonment of the indigenous technology by the people in the region have also contributed to further impoverishment of the region. The pollution of the ecosystem through oil exploration activities and the failure of the multinational oil and gas companies and governments at various levels can as well not be underestimated. They have also contributed tremendously to poverty and underdevelopment in the region in many ways as have been explicated in this chapter.

Endnotes

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