



A COMMENTARY ON THE TRAJECTORY OF ENVIRONMENTAL DISCOURSE IN THE NIGER DELTA

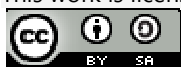
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Introduction

This commentary points to the trajectory of discourses on oil-related environmental change in the Niger Delta. It focuses on the changing variables within the dynamics of pollution and the status and direction of research and advocacy within this dynamics of change. For the purpose of this commentary, three main platforms of information that highlight the dynamics of environmental change as it relates to resource extraction in the Niger Delta are identified. These sources are (i) Niger Delta environmental scholarship, (ii) Local and international environmental advocacy groups and, (iii) Anecdotal and host community experiences. The focus in this article is limited to the first two platforms. One reason for this is that in relation to both platforms, there is comparability in presentations of the causal dynamics of the environmental problems in the region. Another reason is that both platforms are hinged on relative levels of empirical processes in the presentation of evidences and explanation. Moreso, the actors are not mutually exclusive, which adds to the complementarity and comparability in causal presentation that makes up for a large part of the content of prevailing environmental narrative in the region.

Extant scholarship and strategies of environmental advocacy in the Niger Delta have focused on, from a structural/institutional angle, the root causes of the Niger Delta environmental debacle; why regulatory institutions have failed to check the activities of the extractive industry; and the impacts of environmental change on rural socio-economic conditions. What has been most highlighted is the capacity for the state, regulatory institutions and Oil Companies to protect the environmental needs of inhabitants of host communities, reduce the number of grievances that is rooted in the economic stress arising from the externalized environmental cost of pollution, and resolve grievances without parties resorting to the use of violence. The above is understandable when juxtaposed with the body of evidence from which it arises. This body of evidence in effect makes up the prevailing narrative on the Niger Delta environment. Whereas this narrative may come in differing frames, depending on no specific combination of objective or subjective organization of empirical and anecdotal evidence, they espouse the following:

- i. The root cause of the environmental problems in the Niger Delta arises from and revolves around the failure of oil multi-nationals to adhere to international best practices in the industry. This in turn derives from the vested interest of the Nigerian state in the oil industry and the collusion by the state and oil multi-national companies for uninterrupted access to crude oil.
- ii. The main consequences of the above, which includes the resultant low quality of life in communities where oil is extracted, made worse by inadequate corporate social responsibility





- from oil multi-nationals, leading to declining rural income from diminished traditional livelihood structures.
- iii. A central solution combining two or more of the following: resource control, an institutionalized framework for increased access to oil revenue by oil-producing communities, increased CSR by Oil Multinationals, environmental accountability, and increased local content.

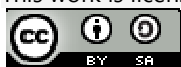
No doubt, narratives have certain utilities and are significant to scholarship as they help frame issues within social and environmental contexts. Also, narratives emerge from and give direction to research through a cause, consequence and solution loop. However, given that a narrative is embedded in socio-environmental contexts, it should also lend itself to the dynamics of change characteristic to social settings.

The Issue

The dynamics of environmental change in the region has been very active, and lately so. This derives from the changing sources of environmental pollution from corporate extractive activities to increasing individual informal economic activities. The question then is, why hasn't the prevailing environmental narrative adjusted with it? From a personal angle, there is the belief that the narrative has remained static for some obvious reasons. While it is not the intention here to be overtly critical of prevailing narratives on the environmental discourse in the region, the static nature of the narrative status quo has certain incidental outcomes for its protagonists viz:

- a) Continued categorization of host communities as victims of the externalization of the environmental costs of extraction, which leads to 'corporate guilt' in the region's environmental woes.
- b) It serves certain economic functions for relevant groups (a) it oils the wheels of funding for advocacy by feeding the empathy of donors (b) as a fertile nursery and springboard for agitation as well as the vibrancy of advocacy.
- c) A linear categorization of communities as victims of oil-related environmental damage canonizes argument streams, and may lead to academic lethargy within environmental discourse in the region.

From a purely academic perspective, the prevailing narrative and frames of explanation by being unresponsive to social and behavioural change only lends itself to academic conservatism. From a critical standpoint, what has been less emphasized in the prevailing environmental narrative is the propensity for individuals to act on agency motivated by the drive to adapt and cope. This then has the tendency to result in actions that reinforce and accelerate environmental pressures on traditional livelihoods. Essentially, it is only until quite recently that outstanding evidence is forcing attention, and cursory at best, to micro-level socio-economic activities as self-contained actions with serious impacts on the environment. Even at this, such actions are not seen as economically and strategically "individual agency-driven", but emerging from the operational and relational activities of oil companies. It is in this regard that this commentary emphasizes the explanatory limitations inherent in narratives on the state of the Niger Delta environment





and how the implicit benefits dependent on the complementarity between empirical scholarship and environmental advocacy in the region drive the prevailing narrative.

It is the position in this commentary that the prevailing narrative increasingly overlooks individual level outcomes that are integral to explaining current environmental dynamics in the region. From a critical standpoint, prevailing narratives highlight a marriage between extant scholarship and the direction of environmental advocacy in the region. It is a trajectory that sustains the milieu upon which advocacy groups rationalize their financial and social relevance.

Undoubtedly, one cannot deny the scholarly and practical benefits of such prevailing narratives, considering hitherto objective realities in the region and specifically in communities where direct extraction takes place, especially when prevailing analyses have provided useful and empirical analyses built on this trajectory of narration. Nonetheless, as Autesserre (2012) points out, an overtly excessive focus on major narratives and recommended solutions often leads to increasingly less attention paid to emergent dynamics that are integral to the continued veracity and relevance of such narratives.

More than the explanatory properties of the narratives espoused by extant scholarship and advocacy, there is another positive, which ironically is also the basis for newer questions in the light of emergent dynamics on oil and the environment. The positive point highlighted here is the position of scholarship and advocacy on the unresponsive nature of extant institutions and legal frameworks towards the environment and the objective conditions in the region. Scholarship and advocacy in the region as such emphasizes the need for a dynamic institutional and legal framework regulating issues of oil and the environment. This point is highlighted in the favoured central solution to the problems in the region. The need for the review of institutions and laws that will cater for and resolve social injustices relating to the issues of access, revenue as well as enforce environmental accountability on the part of the extractive industry.

As one can see, the comparability between scholarship and advocacy thrives on emphasizing the static and unresponsive nature of institutions and laws regarding oil and the environment in the region. This response or lack thereof to changing dynamics is also the riding limitation of extant narratives. It expresses a slower academic and analytic responsiveness to the changing dynamics of individual-level actions concerning oil and the environmental, and how this will improve the robustness of analyses and explanations of environmental discourse in the region. It is practical that institutions and legal frameworks remain stable but not static. Essentially, institutional and legal responsiveness reinforces stability. In other words, stability is reinforced when institutions and laws respond to changing socio-economic conditions influenced by issues that fall within the purview of the institutions and laws in question.

More importantly, individuals also respond to changing socio-economic and environmental conditions. Such responses may be productive or destructive. Research has shown that new forms of behaviour patterns emerge as individuals and groups, by way of adaptation and coping, respond to livelihood stresses arising from changing environmental, social and economic conditions (Daw et al, 2012; Di Falcao, 2014). When this happens, the emergent behaviour patterns may contradict and challenge static institutions and legal provisions, leading to unpredictable outcomes. In the context of oil and the environment in the Niger delta, changing socio-economic conditions have led to the emergence and spread of specific kinds of environmentally significant actions for the current and future state of the environment (Zibima, 2014; 2015).





Need to expand research focus?

It is the position in this article that as an extension of current narratives, there is the increasing need for new research to focus on not only relating structural issues to environmental outcomes, but shifting emphasis from structures and institutions capacity to individuals' capacity to act as well as the social dynamics of the environment (both physical and human) within which such individual actions take place. Another relevant cutout of such an area of research will necessarily include the interconnections that run through issues at the individual level (personal norms/values and environmental values, opportunities to act) and that that transcends the individual (social capital, trust and informal networks of interaction).

One relevant example of the interconnections between the capacity and opportunity to act and the influence of personal/environmental values is the proliferation of crude oil based informal economic activities. Informal economic enclaves that have seen individual actions evolve from being inconspicuous to highly systemic and organized, and with corresponding negative impacts on the environment. In this regard, scholarship and advocacy has to include newer frames of research that will deal with understanding, influencing and projecting impacts and outcomes of individual actions. The benefits of such research expansion are implicit. It will not only improve current explanatory variables but also open new perspectives towards inclusive solutions to the human and physical problems in the region. Without doubt, the nature of economic instrumentation of sources of oil-related environmental pollution, especially pipeline sabotage, has evolved in the region. By this evolution I mean sabotaging oil pipelines for access to raw crude which feeds oil theft and artisanal refining. This is different from sabotaging for the purpose of inducing pollution, which is then used to agitate for monetary compensation and facilitate cleanup contracts. These are actions that now require newer frames of explanation and institutional actions to deal with.

The second example is the issue of dealing with pollution from oil theft and artisanal crude oil refining, both of which are fringe economic actions that represent expressions of the evolution of environmentally significant individual actions in the Niger Delta. These are actions whose environmental implications have become difficult to deal with due to loopholes of culpability in the extant legal provisions dealing with environmental pollution.

A redirection of the prevailing frames of explanation will necessarily reshape the locus of responsibility for environmental outcomes in the region. Whereas this may improve the robustness of explanatory frames within the region's environmental discourse, it may in turn have unintended and disagreeable effects. This in itself may be a demotivation in reframing research direction. Notwithstanding, the point being pushed forth is that there is the need for a demarcation (corporate and individual) of environmentally significant behaviour and the measured importance of both in contributing to the environmental crisis in the region.

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