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OIL DIVESTMENT, ENVIRONMENTAL INJUSTICE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN THE NIGER DELTA

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Abstract
The Niger Delta region of Nigeria which is rich in oil resources, has long been exploited by multinational oil companies, leading to severe environmental degradation, pollution, and health issues for the local communities. Against this background, this study examined the current issue of oil divestment not just as an economic concern but also as a matter of environmental injustice. The Community Theory of Change was used to investigate this current trend of environmental injustice in oil-producing communities in the region and its impact on sustainable development as well as the administrative imperative from the path of government and other critical stakeholders. The different data collected including baseline data revealed that the oil divestment strategy currently being utilized by international oil companies will further exacerbate the environmental and sustainable development challenges of the region. The findings of the study show that there is a serious risk of environmental hazards they have generated such as clean-up responsibilities. Given that the domestic oil companies taking over from their transnational oil counterparts cannot handle these responsibilities, a rethinking of the Delta region is necessary to come up with workable solutions that will address these environmental and development challenges. It is in this regard that it is recommended among other things, that the Federal Government of Nigeria and oil communities should hold the oil multinationals to account for environmental pollution and toxic legacies in the Niger Delta before their exit.

Keywords: Community Theory of Change; Injustice, Niger-Delta Region; Oil-Divestment; Sustainable Development.

Introduction

Corporate capitalism and its exploitative differential calculus of globalization and multilateral imperialism are on the rise daily, making administration in developing countries difficult in terms of delivering development. Currently, it relies less on the people as an instrument of exploitation but on technology to extract material resources from the environment. It is even more exploitative than the previous forms of capitalism because it cares less about the people whose environment it exploits. It pollutes the environment without regard to the livelihood, health, welfare, and sustainability of the people (Nna, 2014). No doubt, corporate capitalism engages, therefore, in what has been regarded as environmental degradation, environmental injustice, and racism against the oil-producing communities. In the Delta region, oil-producing communities lag in the trajectory of sustainable development as their land is largely contaminated as well as sources of water, surface water, sediment, vegetation, air quality, and public health among others are polluted with devastating implications (Sobomate, 2016; UNEP, 2011). In the Ogoni area of Rivers State alone, there were reportedly over 2,976 oil spills of about 2.1 million barrels of oil in Ogoni land, accounting for about 40 per cent of total oil spills of Shell B.P worldwide (Elias, 2011).

A study conducted by a league of Nigerian and international environmental experts in 2006 suggested that the damage caused by oil mining in the Niger Delta (oil-producing communities in Rivers state as core), is devastating and broad and has acted alongside other sources of environmental stress which have led to a severely abridged ecosystem, having massive threat on livelihood, health and basic survival of these communities' impoverished residents (International Union for Conservation of Nature, 2006). According to Onwuka et al (2021), crude oil exploration and production have had adverse environmental effects on soils, forests, and water bodies of oil-producing communities in the Delta. This, of course, affects peasant agriculture which is predominant in these areas in a variety of ways, leading to a decrease in crop yield, soil degradation, hunger, poverty and lack of sustainable development. In the Ogba-Egbema-Ndoni local government area of Rivers state for example, a series of observations have shown a rapid decline in crop yield due to soil contamination (Akonye, 2017), a decline in the health status of the entire population due to problems associated with gas flaring and harmful release of chemicals associated with the drilling of crude oil (Allen and Eze, 2019).

Indeed, the crux here is that the activities of the international oil corporations in oil-producing communities in the Niger Delta inadvertently result in environmental degradation and injustice to the ordinary people. However, the most nagging questions here are: Given the current state of the environment of host communities in the region, is oil divestment in the Niger Delta by International Oil Companies (IOCs) to the advantage of the communities? Who will take environmental responsibility for the clean-up of the host communities already polluted by the MNCs? What is the state of development in these communities that produce the bulk of Nigeria's oil in the Delta? What is the effect of environmental hazards and injustice on the people in this era of sustainable development? What are the administrative and policy implications and imperatives? Given these contexts, a new narrative and paradigm shift in approach and method is imperative.
A rethinking of the Delta region is necessary to come up with workable explanations that will address the environmental and development challenges of the region. This study investigates the current trend of environmental injustice in communities producing oil in the Niger Delta and its impact on sustainable development as well as the administrative imperative from the path of government and other critical stakeholders. The study utilized qualitative data. Content analyses with a mixture of secondary statistical and pictorial data were adopted in the analysis of data to provide for empirical generalization.

Literature Review

Conceptualizing Environmental Injustice and Sustainable Development

The concept of environmental injustice has been variously defined. Schlosberg (2007) maintained that the concept of environmental injustice is traceable to the USA in the 1980s and it underscores the unfair treatment and marginalization of people no matter their colour, race, national origin or income concerning the development, enforcement or implementation of environmental laws. Environmental injustice is a strategy local people adopt to dismantle their perceived irregularities from state actors or corporate organizations (Sobomate, 2016). Importantly, environmental injustice is framed within the American democracy that combines civil rights with environmental concerns or protection demands that those who have been systematically excluded from environmental decision-making, especially, low-income and tribal communities should have the same access to environmental decision-makers, decision-making process and the ability to make a cognate contribution to the decision-making process. Sobomate (2016) noted that the environmental injustice concept gained the needed boost in the 1980s and 1990s, and varieties of groups sprang up in the USA to contend with perceived inequities in the distribution of environmental negative impacts based on the assumptions of threat to public health of the proxy communities. The emergence of the environmental justice concept is also geographical (Walker, 2006). However, it has a conceptual and theoretical root in the theories of social and political power.

According to Holifield (2001), the main drive of environmental justice is to make sure that different strata of people, regardless of national origin, race, or income are protected from diametrical impacts of environmental hazards. To be fully classified as an environmental injustice, residents of communities must possess a minority character as well as low-income category; be alienated from the

environmental policy systems and/or decision-making process subject to the fractional impact from varieties of environmental hazards; and experience a diametrical implementation of environmental regulations, requirements, practice and activities in their communities. Elsewhere, environmental injustice is defined as the disproportionate exposure of communities of colour and the poor to the impact of environmental hazards and degradation (Maantay cited in Sobomate, 2016).

Ebeku (2015) surmised that the concept of environmental injustice evokes the combination of the notions of human rights and environment as a social movement, it places a premium on gender, race and culture, which make the movement distinct from the traditional political economy critique of capitalism (Byrine et al, 2009). Environmental injustice forces groups and people to bear more of the cost of the environmental ills while others benefit at their expense (Pollock and Villus, 1995). Thus environmental injustice presupposes environmental degradation with its attendant consequences - depletion of fresh water, contamination of arable land, underground water, air quality, soil and inappropriate disposal of waste among others, which has a devastating effect on the ecosystem.

Sustainable Development

The idea of sustainable development perhaps hinged on the importance of long-term (intergenerational) environmental and economic equity. It presupposes the conservation of the environment and its resources for future generations while developing (Brodhag and Taliere, 2006). Indeed, it is worth noting that the notion of sustainable development has been interpreted differently by various scholars of note. However, the literal equation of sustainable development underscores maintaining development over time (Elliot, 2013). According to Sen (1999), sustainable development depicts a viable society that is sustainable, in which people's ability to maintain themselves in what they have good reason to value is continually present. According to the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED, 1987), sustainable development is that type of development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of the future generations to similarly meet their own needs. From a policy perspective, Conway (1988, provide page number) conceives sustainable development as "the net productivity of biomass (positive mass balance per unit area per unit time) maintained over decades to centuries". There is an urgent need of integrating development policies and environmental policies and global partnerships to meet the independent environmental concerns and development opportunities of the North and South (Elliot, 2013). There must be striking balance between the current human need for development on the one hand and the protection or preservation of natural resources and the ecosystem upon which the present and future generations depend for sustenance (Oluf, 2000).

Central in the idea of sustainable development is the need to close the vacuum that appeared between the economy and the environment, which can be done by harnessing economic, environmental and social concerns in the lifespan of decision-making (Emas, 2015). Accordingly, Poronakie and Nwaturuogu (2021) maintained that as a goal of modern society, sustainable development rejects all principles and practices that support current living standards by depleting the productive base, including natural resources and that leave future generations with poorer projections and greater risk than our own. Sustainable development must not destroy sustainable livelihood that makes the common man unable to maintain their means of living, sustainable development does not only foster economic transformation but also distributes its benefits equitably; it generates the environment rather than depleting it; it empowers people rather than marginalizing them. It gives priority to the poor; and provides for their participation in decisions affecting them (Adeyemo cited in Poronakie and Nwaturuogu, 2021). In other words, sustainable development should not be anti-nature, anti-jobs, anti-women and anti-children; it puts the future into consideration in all decisions. It is in this regard that a rethinking of the Niger Delta is imperative in line with this new policy directive so that it will be able to meet the needs of the current generation without compromising that of the future generation.

Theoretical framework

A theory is a lens that guides a scientific investigation to a logical conclusion based on prescribed values. Thus this study is based on the "Community theory of change". Succinctly put, the theory of

change presupposes a method that explains how a given intervention, or set of interventions, is expected to lead to specific development (change), drawing on the causal analysis based on the available evidence (UNDAF, 2017). A theory of change helps to identify solutions to effectively address the causes of problems that hinder progress and guide decisions. De Silva, Lee and Ryan (2018), maintained that theory of change is a perspective to developing, implementing and evaluating programmes of development, which has been tested across a variety of programmatic contexts.

The theory of change emerged in the 1990s with foundations laid by the ASPEN Institute Roundtable, which proposed the community theory of change as a manual to evaluating community development programmes (De Silva, Lee and Ryan, 2018). The community theory of change in this context can offer an approach for proper understanding of the "how", "why" and to what extent change happens as a result of the execution of programmes like sustainable development goals in the oil-producing communities in the Niger Delta. It offers a scientific map for evaluating programmes and interventions to find out obstacles that have hindered change (development) in communities (especially in oil-producing communities). O'Flynn (2012) posits that the term theory of change first emerged in the 1990s to address some problems evaluators were facing when trying to access the impact of complex social development programmes. These include poorly articulated assumptions, lack of clarity about how change processes unfolded and insufficient attention given the sequence of changes necessary for long-term goals to be reached.

Indeed, the crux of this theory in this study is based on the impact assessment of sustainable development binomials in the oil-producing communities of the Delta region vis-a-vis the presence of perceived environmental injustice. What is the development (change) index of these communities? Are these changes sustainable? If not what is preventing and/or inhibiting change in these communities? Thus, this theory is adequate for this study as it offers a positive link between planning, monitoring, evaluation, impact assessment and the entire process of administering development. It is a development administration tool to ascertain the level of change and development in communities (O'Flynn and Moberly, 2012).

The Political Economy of Environmental Injustice

Indeed, the main thrust of the Marxian "law of motion" of the development of society is the inhuman dispositions of capitalist expansion. Exploitation and alienation are the key tools of operation. Thus, it can be gleaned that the political economy aspect of environmental injustice is the core aspect of it in the sense that without material resources in vogue, there could hardly be any form of environmental injustice (Johnson, 2006:56). According to Willers (1996), the major aim of capitalism in the instrumentalities of the MNCs is largely to exploit material resources everywhere resource can be found. So long as there is a profit of capital in resource exploitation, every other consideration is determined from it. Thus, it can be seen that for the MNCs, the profit of capital is the most important factor, even in the presence of environmental injustice and degradation.

Onuoha (2009) maintained that the relationship between environmental (natural) resources, livelihood and conflict has long been established in the literature. Environmental resources are the chief political economy axiom, it is also critical for the survival of the people and nation both for economic subsistence and economic mainstay. In a similar vein, Ake (1981) stated that the primary motive of colonization is economic resources; to exploit and degrade the environment (as much as possible) to serve the metropolitan capitalist interest. Indeed, the foregoing discussion shows that oil-producing communities in the Delta region are only a victim of the wheels of politics and economics of multinational oil corporations, thus, for this study to be positioned in the right perspective, environmental injustice is grasped from the prism of political economy.

Environmental Injustice in Niger Delta

Existing literature has established the contemporary nature of environmental injustice in oil-producing communities of the Niger Delta. According to Edet and Etim (2014), the pollution of soil by petroleum hydrocarbons in oil-producing communities is in existence in land areas of sediments and swamp land. Most of the contamination is from crude oil although contamination by refined products

was found at some locations. The assessment found that there is no clay layer across these communities, exposing the groundwater in Ogoni land (and beyond) to hydrocarbon spill on the surface. In 49 cases UNEP observed hydrocarbons in the soil at debts of at least 5 meters (UNEP, 2011:9). At two-thirds of the contaminated land sites close to oil industry facilities which were assessed in detail, the soil contamination exceeds the Nigerian standards, as set out in the Environmental Guidelines and Standards for Petroleum Industries in Nigeria (EGASPIN). At 41 sites, the hydrocarbon pollution (environmental pollution) has reached the groundwater at levels above the Nigerian standards as per the EGASPIN legislation. Many serious cases of groundwater contamination are at Nisisioken Ogale, in Eleme LGA of Rivers State close to a Nigerian National Petroleum Company Product Pipeline where an 8cm layer of refined oil was observed floating on the groundwater which serves the community wells (Ebegbulem, Ekpe and Adejumo, 2011:10).

According to Naku (2022) a group, Youths and Environmental Advocacy Centre, has raised the alarm over an oil spill which reportedly occurred at Touma-Ama Community Manifold in Bille Kingdom, Degema Local Government Area of Rivers State. Indeed, Abi and Nwosu (2011) describe the Egi clan in Rivers State as probably the most infamous underground oil spill location in the Orashi basin as oil spills were observed here since 1970 till date. Ogbogu also records high oil spills as a result of wellheads located in this area (Chokor, 2014). This spill was observed also in K. Dere as a result of the pressurized pipeline rapture in 1990 (Akogun, 2011). It is pertinent to note that in extracting oil from the ground in oil-host communities of the Niger Delta, as elsewhere, the oil industry uses barium sulphate to increase the density of the fluid used in drilling operations and barium is a chemical element that contaminates the soil: other naturally occurring radioactive materials were also observed to have contaminated these areas (Alike, 2011). Accordingly, environmental injustice in oil-producing host communities in the Niger Delta had been scientifically proven by the UNEP Environmental Assessment Report (EAR). UNEP found out that the environmental damage done to the oil-producing host communities in the Delta region with a greater reference to the people, ranges from air pollution, water pollution, loss of aquatic life, contaminated land, groundwater, surface water, sediments, soil, public health etc. (Welch, 2019). These virtually represent the ordeal of typical oil-producing host communities in the Delta region. The report, made available for the first time, scientific and systematic evidence on the exact nature, magnitude and impacts of oil pollution in Ogoniland.

According to UNEP (2011), the findings from the assessment of Ogoniland presuppose that the impact of environmental injustice arising from widespread pollution is extensive. Therefore, a comprehensive environmental restoration effort required for the full rehabilitation of Ogoni land may require as many as 30-50 years for completion. This necessitated an initial 1 billion US dollars set aside for the first years of a 30 year clean-up project in Ogoni land (Adeola. 2018:45). Indeed, another case of groundwater contamination was detected in Ogale, where an 8cm layer of refined oil was observed floating on the groundwater that serves the community wells. Additionally, members of the community were drinking water from wells contaminated with Benzene, a known cancer-causing chemical at a level over 900 times above WHO guidelines (Edet and Etim, 2014). Consequently, the foregoing review of literature has not only revealed the existence of environmental injustice in oil-host communities in the Niger Delta but has also revealed the nature and dimension as well as the high level of environmental injustice in these communities. Akinpelu (2021) avers that Rivers is the worst-hit state in the Delta region when it comes to the issue of environmental injustice arising from the activities of multinational oil corporations. The following presents more analytical and pictorial evidence of environmental injustice in oil-host communities in the Niger Delta:

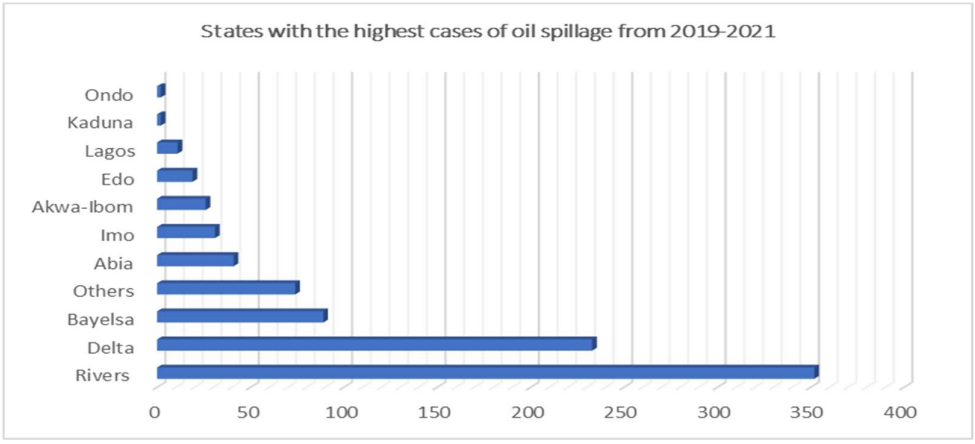


Figure 1: State level of oil spillage in Nigeria: (Akinpelu, 2021)

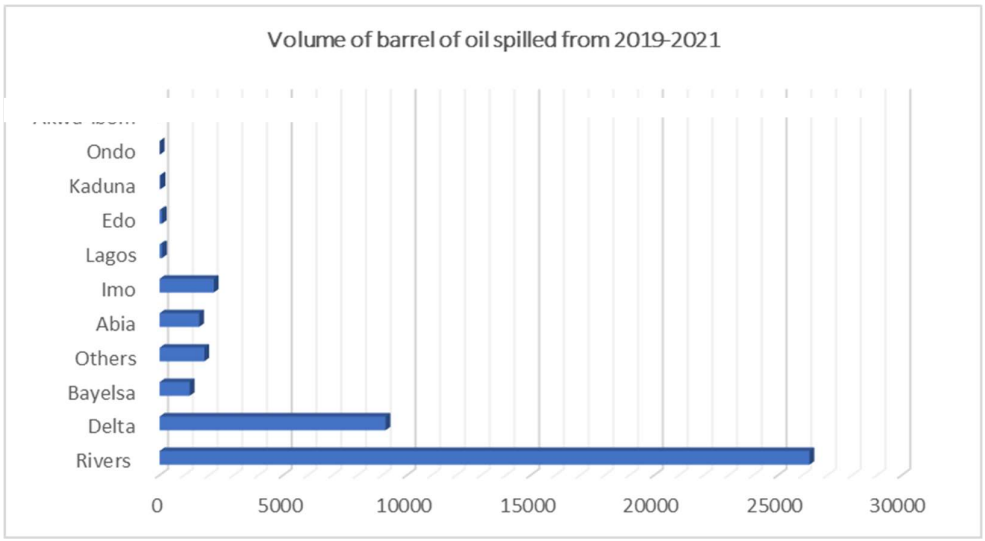


Figure 2: Volume of oil spillage in Nigeria: (Akinpelu, 2021)



Figure 3. Oil spill on the coastal water at Ogoni community, Rivers State, Nigeria (Ite et al, 2021)


Figure 4: oil spill on groundwater at Erema community Rivers State (Naku, 2023)


Figure 5 oil spill on farmland at Okogbe community Ahoada West LGA, R/S (Godwin, 2021)

Current Divestment by the IOCs and the Future of Niger Delta Environment

Divestment is a sort of mechanism adopted by firms to reduce their business portfolio or adjust ownership structure by the way of partial or full disposal of assets of a business unit (Brown, 2021). The Niger Delta has hosted the IOCs for more than four decades and counting and the least they could expect from the IOCs is the current happening of systematic withdrawal from the shores of Niger Delta without adequately remedying the catastrophic environmental impact being left behind in the Niger Delta. According to SDN (2021), IOCs are divesting for a range of reasons which are not unconnected to high cost, increasing risk of operation, social and security threats, legal pressures on environmental matters, selective legislation benefiting government, impact of militancy, oil theft, and increasing reduction in marginal profit. The World Bank (2011) noted that the oil industry in Nigeria's Niger Delta comprises of 30% of Nigeria's GDP yet it is subjected to intense environmental degradation that accompanies the oil extraction process, including water pollution and land pollution appearing to be the most disastrous.

The question here is if the IOCs with their highly sophisticated technology and capital could not clean up the Niger Delta environment who then will have the capacity to do so when they eventually leave the shores of the Niger Delta? Africa Report (2022) revealed that in the past 11 years, the IOCs have divested a total of 26 oil mining licenses (OMLs) in the Niger Delta basin with the numbers likely to continue rising. Indeed, the bleak situation this portends to the Niger Delta may not likely affect only the Niger Delta after all. However, the discussion of the impact of the current divestment by the IOCs on the Niger Delta environment cannot be exhausted in this volume, it, therefore, places an enormous burden on the development administration to take on the challenge now that the IOCs are still within

the shores of the Niger Delta. Attention will now be turned to the contradictions that exist between environmental injustice and sustainable development in the Niger Delta.

The Contradictions Between Environmental Injustice and Sustainable Development

The internecine effects of oil pollution, incessant mismanagement and neglect from the Nigerian State and the IOCs have engendered poverty and conflict in the oil-producing communities (Saliu, Luqman and Abdulahi 2007; Ipingbemia 2009; Egbegbulum, Ekpe, and Adejumo 22013). Thomas (2010) examined the effects of oil spillage on the economy and families in oil-host communities in Ogoni land and other Niger Delta communities. Other studies also identified the consequences of environmental degradation resulting in the death of fish and some other vital economic crops in the communities (Pegg and Zabbey, 2013).

There was also a loss of jobs for the primary producer and the unlimited and uncompensated destruction of personal properties, adverse effect on public health due to a reduction in protein intake as a result of declining fish consumption (Sobomate, 2016:10). Sobomate further noted that the incessant environmental degradation and its consequent implications on sustainable livelihood undermine the adaptive capacity in livelihood and place the local people in a web of vulnerability. Environmental degradation impacts livelihood in complete loss of source of livelihood activities and a decline in household income. One reason why the oil spill impacted so heavily on household income was not unconnected to the people's dependence on natural resource-based livelihood activities and in particular, farming and fishing without diversifying the source of household income (Sobomate, Ibid).

Thus, instead of multinational corporations and the Nigerian state providing the needed boost for sustainable development, they are now the ones hoisting the flag of "sustainable" environmental injustice further to exploit the people's environment for resource accumulation. Sustainable development has to do with meeting the developmental needs of the people both in terms of present and future, where the adaptive capacity of the present generation is destroyed one will begin to wonder what will happen to the future generation. Egirani et al (2021) maintained that oil pollution exposes the environment to many chemical discharges that are dangerous for the sustainability of biodiversity and man in general particularly in the Niger Delta.

Conclusion

This study investigated the theoretical link between environmental injustices in oil-producing communities and sustainable development in the Niger Delta. Although environmental injustice is conceived in a broader sense, this study focused more on oil spillage resulting from the activities of international oil multinational companies and their clusters. Indeed, the evidence presented in this study has shown that there is the existence of high-level environmental injustice in oil-producing communities of the Niger Delta. However, the crux here is that the results presented have empirically established the existence and the nature of environmental injustice in oil-producing communities in the Niger Delta. Again, the results presented here revealed that environmental injustice has undermined and will liquidate any chances of fostering sustainable development in the oil-producing communities in the Delta. Of course, the major axiom of sustainable development is environmental preservation. It is no gainsaying that poverty, hunger, poor health strives; adverse effects of climate change, life on land, and life below water have worsened in these oil-producing communities. Abruptly, these emerging issues portend a danger to the continued existence of human beings living in these areas, particularly as the oil multinationals are divesting and abandoning the environmental responsibility to domestic oil companies that do not have the resources to engage in such clean-up.

Recommendations

The study recommends the following:

(1) Federal Government of Nigeria should hold the oil companies to account for environmental pollution and toxic legacies in the Niger Delta before their exit.
(2) The government should also not ignore the issues of environmental injustice while granting licenses to domestic oil corporations because no matter the amount of money generated from

oil exploration, it cannot replace the biodiversity lost and it cannot undo the ecological damage caused to the environment of oil producing communities.

(3) Similarly, the government should create employment opportunities or create a boosting atmosphere for a private sector-led economy for the creation of the needed employment opportunities for the teeming youth population to take them away from oil bunkering and sabotaging of oil facilities in their communities that leads to more oil spillage.

(4) The various communities in the Niger Delta Region should maintain a strong stance on the issues of environmental injustice before signing any Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with multinational oil corporations - they should make sure that they are not mortgaging themselves and their future generations. Communities should demand a total halt to the activities that lead to environmental injustice in their domain.

(5) Policymakers and development administrators should develop mechanisms to ensure proper monitoring of exploration activities to avoid the scourge of emerging development of sustainable underdevelopment in the oil-producing communities of the Niger Delta.

(6) Finally, multinational oil corporations should also recognize that an efficient mining process without environmental injustice is a core part of their corporate social responsibility, not only donating funds and providing infrastructures and social amenities.

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