



Sustainable Development: A Case for Female-Headed Households in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria

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Abstract

Sustainable development for female-headed households in Niger Delta rural communities is needed to alleviate their suffering because there is heightened tension in the region. Sustainable development is about improving the lives of people; hence the need to raise the standard of living of female-headed households in the region. Therefore, the paper looked at sustainable development goals, potentials and lack in Niger Delta rural communities, causes of poverty, and cycle of frustration in the region. Recommendations were made to minimize the problems faced by female-headed households in the creeks.

Keywords: Female-headed, Poverty, Sustainable development, Militants, Pirates, Palliative, Niger Delta, Nigeria.

Reference to this paper should be made as follows:

China, M. A., Lilly, G., & Igbemi, M. J. (2017). Sustainable Development: A Case for Female-Headed Households in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria. *International Journal of Scientific Research in Education*, 10(2), 148-155. Retrieved [DATE] from <http://www.ij sre.com>

INTRODUCTION

Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) declared by United Nations in 2000 obviously aimed to improve the status of women as well as their general empowerment because all of its eight goals have implication for women. The goals are for the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger; achieving universal primary education; promoting gender equality and empower women; reducing child mortality; improving maternal health; combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other disease; ensuring environmental sustainability; and developing a global partnership for development. It was an unfinished programme that expired/elapsed in 2015 that ushered in Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), yet the plights of female-headed households are still unsustainable. The SDGs known as transforming our world by 2030 or global goals has 17 targets/goals as an extension of MDGs since September, 2015. Up till now, the problem of women in rural areas, especially female-headed households in the region has not been addressed. So, there is need to evaluate this issue as there is now palliative change matrix through sustainable development programmes in Nigeria. The earlier the issue is brought to the front burner of the development plan of Nigeria, the better it would be for female-headed households in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria.

Female-headed households consist of single female-parent households, divorcees and widows fending for their families. Blank (1988) and Buvinic and Gupta (1997) found that typical female-headed household of low income status are impoverished and live in shanties. Female-headed households are in fact poorer than other households, therefore, headship should be seriously being considered as a target in alleviating poverty in any development programme.

According to Lilly (2012), the role played by women based on cultural standing is not appreciated as it ought to be. The combinations of breadwinning, motherhood, and homemaking have significant impact in families faced with economic challenges. Moreover, female-headed household women are more challenged than other group of vulnerable poor, hence the concern.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGS) AT A GLANCE

The SDGs are contained in paragraph 54 United Nations Resolution A/RES/70/1 of 25 September, 2015. The 17 SDGs targets are:

- Ending poverty in all its form;
- End hunger and achieve food security by improved nutrition through sustainable agriculture;
- Good health and wellbeing;
- Education by ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all;
- Gender equality and women empowerment;
- Water and sanitation;
- Energy by ensuring access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and clean energy;
- Economic growth by promoting sustained inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all;
- Infrastructure and industrialization;
- Reduce inequality within and among countries;
- Make cities and human settlement inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable;

- Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns;
- Climate change;
- Conserve and sustainable use of oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development;
- Biodiversity, forests, deforestation as humans protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss;
- Peace and justice for all at all level; and
- Partnerships by strengthening the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development (Wikipedia, 2015; The Guardian. 2015; United Nations Development Programme – UNDP, 2015).

These goals are to be domesticated in all the partnering countries of the world; hence it is a global goal for all. These goals are achievable when there is political will and the right agencies and ministries are empowered for sustainable delivery of the SDGs within the time frame.

POTENTIAL AND LACK IN NIGER DELTA REGION

The Niger Delta, especially the creeks is the home for the country's vast reserve of oil and gas resources. The Niger Delta region is the main oil producing area and thereby account for 98% of the nation's crude oil production which has made them the main revenue-generating region in the country. Yet, the people live on less than \$1 dollar per day which is a measure of absolute poverty (Niger Delta Peace Proposal, 2016). The region is noted for its high biodiversity and abundant natural resources of land and sea. Several years of oil and gas exploration has resulted to environmental degradation and pollution of the land and sea, which have robbed the people of its flora and fauna. This has affected the economic stay of the people, especially female-headed households, and it is a known fact that often women are not accommodated in the economic alternatives of the region (politics and youth activism). Majority of the people, especially the women are in abject poverty because both the sea and land are polluted due mainly to oil spillages and pipeline vandalism. According to Ellah (2006), the presence of multinationals in the region ought to provide employment opportunities, increase income and improvement in standard of living; instead, they are plagued with reduction in food production, oil spillage, environmental pollution and diseases. The succor is to address the issue of abject poverty in the palliative measures of the change matrix in the country for sustainable female-headed household development.

Full implementation of the sustainable development plan is highly needed to cushion the plight of women whose trade is farming and fishing in the Niger Delta region. Despite the huge sums of income generated from the region for the nation's coffer and regional agencies, women in farming and fishing in the region are systematically sidelined in all the developmental plan of the nation. Yet, the activities of seismic firms, dredging firms and oil company's oil spills affect women farmers and fishers (Ellah, 2006; Haruna, 2014). The fishing business of women in the creek is mainly anchored in seafood such as prawns, oyster, shrimps, crabs, periwinkle, and even fish. Oil spillages and the effect of dredging and seismic activities have devastated the biodiversity of the mangrove environment. The ecology of the area is greatly affected because companies operating in the region do not honor conservative principles accepted globally, as they flare gas and spill the crude oil from rusted pipes. In Nigeria, every government programme

of economic importance is in the pipeline, so economic disadvantaged citizens are into pipe vandalism (crude and gas), thereby compounding the problem of pollution in the area, making it difficult for fishing and farming activities. The farm lands and creeks are polluted with oil spills

CAUSES OF POVERTY IN THE REGION

According to Nwenezi (2011), the poor are mainly located in the rural areas, and poverty is characterized by women, widows, female-headed households, among others. There are several causes of poverty in the Niger Delta Region but notably among them are environmental degradation and pollution, poor attitude towards education, activities of militancy, and lack of dividend of democracy.

Environmental degradation/pollution: This is the main cause of poverty in female-headed household. Haruna put the quantity of oil spilled into the environment each year at 2,500 cubic meters (660,430 gallon/year) with an average of 300 individual spills/year or almost one spill per day. Meanwhile, the World Bank (2014) argues that the true quantity of oil spill is 25 thousand cubic meters each year i.e. 6.6 million gallons/year. On the other hand, Department of Petroleum Resources –DPR (2016) estimated that between 1976–1996 a total of 4,647 incidents of spills, approximately 2,369,470 barrels (99,517,740 gallons) of oil into the Delta’s aquatic and marine ecosystem in Nigeria. Also Nigeria is classified among the top 10 countries responsible for 75% gas flaring emission in the world. It was further stressed that seismic activities, exploration and dredging by oil firms also damage and fragment the ecosystem and habitat across the Delta (Haruna, 2014). It is worthy to note that different phases of the oil exploration, production, refining, and transportation also degrade the environment. This is even worsened by pipeline vandalism, illegal refining and discharging of the by-products in the sea as being done by Niger Delta Militants in the Creeks.

In another dimension, Gbamanja in Nwaenyi and Egbesor (2001) noted that another major problem caused by these households is health problems of depending on the creeks. This is because riverine communities defecate on land and into the water, so the excrements with their load of bacteria and viruses, both disease carrying and beneficial, are washed into the streams and creeks from where they obtain water for domestic purposes and kill fishes for their meals. This form of environmental pollution is equally hazardous to the health of the people. According to Igbemi (2008) human waste pose great health risks for the many people who are compelled to drink and wash in untreated water from rivers. She further cited World Development Report that states that the use of polluted waters for drinking and bathing is one of the principal pathways for infection by diseases that kill millions and sicken more than a billion people each year. According to Nwenezi (2011) land degradation and the depletion of land resources have economic implications for low-income and poor rural households.

Poor Attitude towards Education: Even when people have equal opportunities, human beings do not interact equally to issues of importance. According to Nwaenyi and Egbesor (2001), the low-lying riverine Delta area has been identified as educationally backward generally, and women education the worse. They noted that the problem of low educational attainment of women is not that of natural endowment but that of environment (gender bias, teenage pregnancy, unequal access education due to distance and terrain, and family financial constraints). World Bank (2014) cuts Nigeria’s poverty rate to 33.1%, and says the North is poorer. This is arguable, because poverty is very high in Niger Delta creeks because of the educational backwardness of females in the area. This is traceable to poor educational attainment

and high drop-out rate due to teenage pregnancy and unstable marriages. Sadly, the high unemployment rate of graduates in the region is used as a pointer to the needlessness of education in present day Nigeria, and especially the expensive lifestyle of militants in comparison with civil servants or other workers in the area.

Activities of Militancy: Militancy is a curse in disguise to female-headed household because the agitation for resource control has made the militants to fight, which has resulted to more cases of rape. The creeks are polluted as a result of illegal refining of crude oil, adulterated kerosene fire accidents alias 'Asari', increase sea piracy in the water ways, and renewed hostility in the region. Amnesty Coordinator Paul Boroh relocated his base to the creeks recently to persuade the militants have re-think of their attitude (as reported by Ugwuanyi, 2016). The situation worsen in the creeks because dozens of former militants have returned to the creeks for arm hostility again after enjoying Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP) largess, with the aim of crippling crude oil production (O'Neil, 2016). The Federal Government and the oil companies may be greatly affected but the main brunt is borne by the people directly in the creeks with them. The youth restiveness is becoming unbearable for female-headed households in the creeks of Niger Delta, as poverty dive deeper in the communities.

Lack of Dividend of Democracy: The discrimination of men against women is carried into the political terrain and is being reinforced in successive regimes. To this effect the emancipation of the girl-child and women is only a lip service and fan-fare of First-Lady's pet programmes. This rooted cancerous problem of women marginalization should be nibbled at the bud in the change agenda, but women are being skeptical because female-inclusiveness has fallen short when compared with transformation agenda based on affirmative action. According to Onyije (2011) the conscience of leaders and followers at all level need to be conscientised and re-oriented to suit the concept of women as equal partners in the sustainable development of the country. The woman is just the other side of the coin. Onyije further hinted that democratic dividend is not forth coming because of corruption of politicians and office holders. Siphoning of the nation's wealth and money laundry has not been minimized by graft agencies in Nigeria. This needs to be given serious attention by relevant arms of government.

CYCLE OF FRUSTRATION OF WOMEN IN THE AREA

The activities of the oil firms have also resulted into the degradation of the environment with dire consequences for the people, animals and plants alike (Haruna, 2014). This negative effect hampers women in engaging in their traditional farming and fishing activities, yet there is need for female-headed household to meet their basic needs (caring for themselves and their children). The villages are deserted and the women left behind have been reduced to beggars.

In Niger Delta region, the rural women who no longer engage actively in their occupation of fishing and farming, cannot even engage in trading as kidnappers, sea pirates and militants terrorize them on the land and sea and cart away their goods and money in transit. Worse still, they cannot even participate in the dividend of derivation/oil exploration that trickles down to the villages because in most core Riverine Niger Delta States, women cannot be chiefs and are unable to carry arms to intimidate oil firms. The youth leaders of the region are always men, but when there is need to shut-down oil wells to meet their selfish aim, it the idle women they gather and take to the place of action for hunger strike. Of course these women have nothing to lose, after all, most of the day they have no food, hope or future; so the armed youths/political chiefs could use them as weapon of oil warfare. The little hope is for the desperate to date/befriend the

chiefs and Niger Delta activists' alias Militants, and when they get pregnant, they are abandoned again.

CONCLUSION

This theoretical debate has moderately evaluated the issue of sustainable development and female-headed households in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. In this discussion we found that female-headed households in the Niger Delta communities are in dire need of sustainable palliative measures to cushion the effects of multifaceted onslaught on their economic stay in the region by oil firms and Niger Delta militants' activities. The main occupations of farming, fishing and petty trading are put on hold, so how to meet the basic needs of their household and educate their children is now a major challenge. To meet their basic needs, there is need for assistance from the government at all levels, oil firms and NGOs in alleviating their poverty through soft loans, skill training and scholarship for their children from secondary school level.

Recommendations

For the plight of female-headed households to be addressed, the following suggestions are put forth:

- Incentives for the education of the girl-child and women should be included in any programme of empowerment by government and oil firms. They should be taught in skills of general education, economic productivity, sexuality and productive education, and sanitary education. When the woman is equipped educationally, the family would be better for it. Scholarship should be given to all females and children of female-headed households in oil producing communities in tertiary institution.
- The Ministries of Women Affairs and Niger Delta should pay special attention to the plight of women in all producing communities by intensive entrepreneurship training and establishment of cottage industries of seafood processing.
- Oil and gas companies should employ female graduates of the region considering gender equity, as the current practice of employment favours mostly men.
- Oil and gas companies and other firms in the region should ensure that memoranda of understanding (MOU) reached with communities enshrine 30% affirmation action of women inclusiveness in all dealings. Women too are stakeholders in the community.
- Federal Government should re-deploy more patrol vehicles, gun-boats and other patrol boats to cover all the routes of the region, especially the creeks. This will help to minimize incidences of sea piracy and kidnapping.
- Green peace standard for biodiversity conservation should be applied across the region. Conservationists and environmentalists should proffer ways to sustain the region in the mix of oil exploration to ensure sustainable and healthy environment for the people.
- To prevent health hazards, the three tiers of government and the oil firms should ensure the provision of safe drinking water and health centers in all the communities.
- Companies in the area as their social responsibility should ensure sustainable business environment by giving vulnerable women business loans, farming implements and fishing gears through cooperatives to ensure continuity.

- Female-headed household women should take responsibility of their life by making the right choices of life in relationship, productive health/decision, and economic freedom for the wellbeing of their households.

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