

OIL WEALTH, WATER SCARCITY: THE UNFULFILLED QUEST FOR CLEAN WATER IN NIGERIA'S *OKORITAK* COMMUNITY.

By

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Abstract

Despite Nigeria's vast petroleum wealth, many oil-producing communities' remains trapped in environmental degradation and acute water insecurity. The paradox of resource abundance and socio-environmental deprivation is epitomized in *Okoritak* community, where oil wealth co-exists with acute water scarcity. This paper examines the irony of resource abundance and basic service deprivation through a case study of the Okoritak community in Niger Delta region of Nigeria. It interrogates the structural, legal, and governance failure that have perpetuated the community's prolonged and unfulfilled quest for access to clean and safe water despite its proximity to one of Nigeria's lucrative oil reserves. It delves into the inequitable resource distribution that has compounded the water crisis. Drawing on field studies, legal frameworks and policy analyses, the paper highlights the role of oil exploration activities in contaminating water sources and explores the inadequacies of State and corporate interventions in addressing the crisis. The paper further investigates the intersection of environmental justice and human rights, advocating for sustainable policy reforms and community-driven solutions. Ultimately, it calls for integrated water management strategies to ensure sustainable access to clean water and improve public health outcomes in the community. The findings reveals a persistence disconnect between constitutional guarantees, statutory frameworks, and practical enforcement, Regulatory fragmentation, limited community participation and weak accountability mechanisms have compounded the crisis. The paper argues that the failure to secure potable water in Okoritak community reflects deeper governance deficits in resource management and distributive justice. It concludes by proposing a rights-based community-centered approach that integrate stronger regulatory enforcement, corporate environmental responsibility, and judicial oversight

Keywords: Oil Wealth, Water Scarcity, Clean water access, Environmental Justice *Okoritak* Community, Nigeria

1. Introduction

Prior to the discovery of oil in Nigeria in the 1950s, Nigeria has become one of the leading oil producers in Africa at the end of the *Biafra* war after the successful commercial drilling at *Olobiri* in the 1960s.¹ Since the successful first drilling at *Olobiri* in 1956, Nigeria has evolved into one of the leading oil producers in the world.¹ Research indicates that oil exploration has boosted the economic development, contributing substantially to revenue generation and foreign participation in Nigeria.¹ The substantial reliance on oil is further demonstrated by the oil sector's considerable contribution to Nigeria's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) over the decades¹. Contrary to the natural expectation that countries blessed with abundance of natural resources should prosper, it is however being observed over the years that countries rich in oil, gas or mineral resources have been disadvantaged in the drive for environmental and socio-economic progress, especially for resource-hosting communities.¹

Okoritak community situated in Ibeno Local Government Area, Akwa Ibom State, as one of the resource-hosting regions endowed with significant oil wealth qualifies the paradox of plenty.¹ Rich in natural resources, the community has been a focal point of oil exploration activities for decades. However, despite the community's contribution to oil production in Nigeria, it faces a plethora of challenges, including environmental pollution, loss of biodiversity and socio-economic inequalities.¹ The major concern of the community discovered during research is the fact that, the community's sole water source is an abandoned oil well formerly constructed by Network Exploration, a prominent oil company active in the state.¹ The residents of the community primarily reside in thatched houses, with the only educational facility being a government primary school where teachers are mostly absent in a calendar year. Consequently, accessing quality education often necessitates crossing the river to neighbouring areas. Additionally, the village lacks a well-structured healthcare centre, further compounding the community's infrastructural deficiencies.¹ The challenges of the *Okoritak* community raise critical questions about the sustainability of oil exploration and the extent to which the benefits of resource exploitation flow down to local communities.¹ Consequently, this paradox underscores the failure of governance and resource management to address the fundamental needs of the people living in areas that fuel national development.

This paper, while highlighting the plight of the *Okoritak* community, aims to uncover the reasons behind the paradox of oil wealth and water scarcity in resource-hosting communities

and propose actionable solution for sustainable development. The significance of this paper lies in its potential to contribute to policy reforms, advocate for environmental justice and enhance the socio-economic well-being of resource-hosting communities.

2. Lack of Basic Amenities in Nigeria's Resource-Rich Regions: The Water Crisis in *Okoritak*

Nigeria, officially referred to as the giant of Africa based on its enormity, is richly endowed with natural resources, such as, oil, gas, solid minerals and massive land. Ironically, the majority of the resource-rich areas that contribute to the nation's economic development are underdeveloped, dominated by extreme poverty and a persistent shortage of basic amenities.¹ Water, simply a fundamental necessity for human survival, requires no further explanation.¹ However, access to an adequate supply of clean and safe water remains a challenge unmet for over half of the global population.¹ Fundamentally, despite the abundant freshwater reserves in Nigeria, access to clean water remains a challenge for millions of Nigerians. This paradox of water scarcity amid abundance is largely driven by pollution, poor resources management and the negative environmental impact of oil extraction activities.¹ Isukuru and others in their paper¹, noted that, water pollution has become a major threat to water scarcity, exacerbating existing socio-economic and environmental challenges. It is discovered that the counter-effect of crude oil extraction have led to widespread oil spills, gas flaring and industrial waste disposal, all of which contaminate the surface and groundwater sources.¹

The *Okoritak* community is a living example of where oil pollution has left the water unsafe for consumption. The *Okoritak* community, situated in Nigeria's oil-producing regions, faces significant challenges in accessing clean and safe water.¹ Despite the critical importance of potable water for health and well-being, residents of the community have been compelled to rely on contaminated streams, leading to severe public health concerns.¹

The main source of water for *Okoritak* residents is a local stream, which has been contaminated by contaminants, including harmful bacteria.¹ Ingestion of this contaminated water has led to a high rate of waterborne diseases, including cholera, dysentery and other gastrointestinal diseases. Adding to the water quality challenge is the breakage of the community's major borehole, which has not been functioning for a long time. The borehole, which was once an essential source of pure water, has been plagued by mechanical breakdowns and poor maintenance. In spite of the gravity of the situation, there has been, interestingly, little government intervention.¹ The people's pleas to help fix the borehole and deal with the polluted water supply have not been met with any meaningful response. This

neglect reflects broader systemic issues, including insufficient infrastructure investment and a lack of effective policies to ensure the provision of basic amenities in resource-rich regions.¹ The government's inaction has perpetuated the community's reliance on unsafe water sources, thereby sustaining the cycle of waterborne diseases and associated socio-economic challenges.¹

In summary, the *Okoritak* community's struggle with accessing clean water underscores the critical need for immediate and sustained interventions. Addressing the mechanical failures of the borehole, implementing regular maintenance protocols and ensuring governmental support are essential steps toward resolving the water crisis. Such measures are imperative to safeguard public health and promote sustainable development in the region.¹

3. Governance and Policy Failures

Environmental governance in Nigeria is guided by a complex array of legal and policy frameworks intended to balance economic development with environmental protection. However, despite these frameworks, resource-rich communities like *Okoritak* continue to grapple with environmental challenges, especially water scarcity, triggered by governance and policy gaps.

The National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency (NESREA) Act of 2007 is a critical legislation through which NESREA becomes the flagship institution for enforcing environmental laws, regulations and standards. The Act mandates the agency to oversee compliance with environmental policies, promote sustainable development and safeguard natural resources.

The NESREA Act is complemented by the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Act of 1992, which mandates that any project with the potential to have a significant impact on the environment be subjected to rigorous evaluation prior to its implementation.¹ The procedure seeks to anticipate environmental impacts at an early phase, identify measures to mitigate negative impacts, and design projects to fit into the local environment. The EIA Act is key to the prevention of environmental degradation by ensuring that potential impacts are incorporated into decision-making.¹ Moreover, the Environmental Impact Assessment Procedures Charges and Regulations specifies procedural requirements for conducting EIAs, emphasizing the need for careful evaluation prior to the initiation of projects with potential environmental impacts.¹ Particularly, sections 1-5 of the decree mandates that project developers must submit detailed EIA reports to the Federal Ministry of Environment for review and approval before project initiation.¹ This is intended to identify and prevent adverse

environmental effects in advance. Thus, in *Okoritak's* situation, adherence to this requirement would imply that all oil drilling activities must undergo rigorous environmental assessment to prevent water pollution of local water sources.

Policy-wise, Nigeria's Climate Change Bill Signed into an Act by the Former President Buhari in November 2021, is a step forward in addressing environmental concerns.¹The Act mandates the establishment of a National Climate Change Action Plan and a five-year carbon budget with clear annual targets. The Act also creates the National Council on Climate Change with the mandate to implement the action plan and manage the Climate Change Fund. All these are signs of Nigeria's seriousness in tackling climate change impacts and attaining environmental sustainability.¹However, despite the robust policy and legal foundations, the *Okoritak* community continues to face severe water scarcity issues, indicating a disconnection between policy making and implementation.¹ The primary sources of water for the community have been polluted by oil drilling operations, rendering them unsafe for consumption. The malfunction of the primary borehole, which is a major facility for supplying clean water, has aggravated the situation. Repeated appeals to the government for assistance in repairing and maintaining this critical facility have not been successful, and thus the locals have no choice but to utilize polluted streams.¹

This case identifies some policy and governance weaknesses. First, there is a significant gap in environmental policy implementation. Institutions charged with monitoring and enforcing compliance generally lack sufficient resources, autonomy, and political will to carry out their mandates. This weakness allows polluting activities to continue with few consequences, and it has a direct impact on communities like *Okoritak*. Additionally, the absence of a concerted and responsive intervention measure aggravates the problem within the community. That there is no timely repair and maintenance of key water infrastructure indicates systemic inefficiencies within government agencies responsible for the provision of public utilities. This failure not only contravenes the provisions of the current environmental law but also raises questions about the government's commitment to guaranteeing the environmental rights of citizens.

4. Corporate Responsibility and Community Relations

Studies depict that environmental pollution resulting from business operations remains a significant issue in Nigeria in spite of the existence of various regulations and regulatory bodies.¹ The oil companies in Nigeria have also largely impacted the environment, especially through processes that result in oil spillage and pollution.¹ These incidents have contaminated

major sources of water, negatively impacting the health and livelihood of the people in the surrounding communities.¹ For example, widespread oil drilling activities have resulted in massive environmental degradation, such as soil and water pollution, air pollution, and disruption of ecosystems. These environmental damages have direct implications for the health and livelihood of the local communities.¹

In spite of the glaring environmental degradation, oil companies tend to blame oil spills on sabotage and theft, thus escaping accountability for environmental remediation. This deflection of responsibility heightens the suffering of impacted communities, forcing them to confront degraded environments with insufficient assistance or compensation.¹ Some of the principal oil companies active in AkwaIbom State are Shell Oil Company, Total Oil, Chevron, Agip Oil, and Network Exploration. Lack of accountability and a strong reaction from these corporations has compounded environmental and socio-economic challenges in communities like *Okoritak*.¹ In response to mounting criticism, oil firms have claimed that they have implemented corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives aimed at enhancing community development and environmental management. These initiatives generally involve projects that address education, healthcare and infrastructure development. Ironically, the only notable CSR in *Okoritak* is the unused well abandoned by Network Exploration. Nonetheless, the well has been reported to be unused for over 25 years since it broke down. Hence, the effectiveness of these CSR interventions becomes questionable.¹

Critics argue that CSR activities are superficial and fail to address the roots of environmental degradation. A study notes that the industry uses CSR as social license to gain and sustain acceptability from host communities, yet such activities become superficial and fails to lead to tangible change.¹ In addition, the implementation of CSR projects is sometimes marred by a lack of transparency and involvement of the local population, leading to projects that are not relevant to the actual needs of the people.¹ This mismatch breeds suspicion between oil firms and communities, undermining the potential gains of CSR.

To combat the negative effects that accompany oil production and ensure sustainable development in communities such as *Okoritak*, a holistic strategy is needed:

1. Strengthening Regulatory Frameworks: Nigeria's government needs to enact stringent environmental legislation and make oil companies accountable for pollution.¹ This includes demanding detailed Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) before project initiation and regular monitoring of oil drilling activities.

2. **Enhancing Community Engagement:** Oil companies should focus on meaningful participation of the local communities in decision-making regarding resource management and CSR projects.¹ This inclusive strategy will make sure that projects reflect community priorities.
3. **Effective Remediation Measures:** There is a compelling need for the restoration of contaminated ecosystems. It is important that oil companies work together with environmentalists and locals to establish and apply effective decontamination techniques, thereby reviving ecosystems and averting health risks.¹
4. **Promoting Transparency and Accountability:** It is necessary to establish open mechanisms for reporting and responding to environmental accidents. This includes public disclosure of spill incidents, clean-up activities and CSR expenditures, enabling the communities to hold companies accountable.
5. **Investment in Sustainable Development:** Besides short-term remediation, oil companies should invest in sustainable development projects that bring long-term gains to host communities.¹ This includes supporting alternative livelihoods, renewable energy initiatives, and capacity-building programs

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

Though Nigeria has established comprehensive legal and policy structures for protecting the environment, the case of *Okoritak* community illustrates sheer governance and policy implementation failures. Bridging the policy-practice gap is therefore necessary to mitigate environmental issues and promote sustainable development in Nigeria.¹ To overcome these challenges, it is necessary to enhance the capacity of institutions, guarantee stringent enforcement of environmental regulations and build true political will to push the agendas of impacted communities forward.¹ Besides, Nigeria needs to develop a more sustainable attitude towards water resource management. Furthermore, investment in water treatment facilities, enforcement of better environmental regulations and encouragement of friendly oil production practices for the environment are key steps towards mitigating the effects of pollution on water security.¹

In addition, economic revenues accrued from the oil sector should be channelled to projects for supplying clean water, thus ensuring that oil-affected communities receive adequate compensation and supply of drinking water.¹ Future studies need to give priority to developing and testing adaptation options expressly intended to cater to the needs of

disproportionately affected communities of climate change and ensuring that these approaches are culturally appropriate as well as sustainable.

Essentially, as Humphrey¹ asserted, institutions that fail to carefully take heed of community voices are apt to miss subtle aspects of public opinion, thus undermining the foundation for strong and positive relationships.¹ Therefore, by integrating environmental protection into economic planning, Nigeria can break the long-standing trend of resource wealth existing alongside water scarcity, enabling a more equitable and sustainable distribution of water resources across the country.

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