

# AMNESTY ON OIL EXPLORATION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGER DELTA REGION: RELEVANCE AND CHALLENGES TO THE NIGERIAN CHURCH

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the various upheavals engendered by the activities of the oil multinationals in the Niger Delta region. It attempts to proffer enduring solution to the seemingly endangering atmosphere of oil exploration and environmental degradation in the oil-rich Niger Delta region. The research aims to provide a successful resolution and a basis for attaining conflict prevention, good governance and sustainable management of natural resources. This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory case-study design. The research reveals that the oil-rich region is the third-largest wetland in the world. Secondly, it is primarily populated by Christians whose youth have become restive over their natural resources. The research concludes that oil in this region is a natural gift; as such, it should be a blessing and not a curse, hence a theological approach. The paper, therefore, recommends the physical presence of the federal government and multinational companies as a stimulating factor to recalibrate social order in the region, which is a function of social justice.

**Keywords:** Amnesty, oil exploration, sustainable development, the Niger Delta, relevance, challenges, Nigerian church

## **Introduction**

The Niger Delta, Nigeria's oil belt is the world's third largest wetlands covering a vast coastal plain of the country. This region occupies an important position in Nigeria's development process. Since oil was first struck more than forty years ago, the region has grown to become the source of more than 90% of Nigeria's foreign exchange receipts (Ubhenin, 2006). Despite the substantial economic progress and social advancement in other parts of the country, the Niger Delta is replete with problems, which manifest in poverty, low levels of human development, environmental degradation, among other social and infrastructural problems. Income and social inequalities and long-term unemployment are recurring decimals in the region. As a result, social exclusion results from those problems, threatening social cohesion and democracy.

Conventionally, oil was supposed to be a blessing when it was discovered in the Niger Delta in 1956 (*The Nation*, 2009 a). The story, unfortunately, has turned out the other way. Oil, the supposed blessing of yesteryears, has become a curse today, all because of the neglect of the areas where it was discovered. It is an eyesore to note that the oil-producing areas have been despoiled by the companies operating there. While the managers of those firms live in opulence, the indigenes of those areas scavenge for the scraps from their table. Besides not getting the good things of life from being the host communities of these super-rich firms, their lands and rivers have been polluted. Consequently, they can no longer till the soil or fish, which are their age-long means of livelihood.

The social scourges of poverty and joblessness are widespread, with attendant disaffection and social discontent, particularly among the youths who are faced with reduced job opportunities and have become restive in their bid for greater control of their natural resources. The dire consequences of this are that it has led to the formation of ethnic militia groups agitating for self-determination of their natural endowment. Interestingly, the various governments of the states of the Niger Delta region have joined the fray, actively campaigning for resource control and by implication, providing cover for the militia groups operating within their territories. In so doing, the country has witnessed economic crises and political instabilities. Therefore, managing the conflict situation in the region has become imperative to the government and the citizens of Nigeria.

This paper, therefore, examines the fundamental issues that have perennially turned the Niger Delta into a crisis-ridden region, with emphasis on the latter day Niger Delta struggle which had led to the then-presidential amnesty granted the militants, as a panacea for meaningful sustainable development. Again, on another note, it further x-rays the degree of relevance and challenges this might pose to the church and christens in Nigeria as a whole and the Niger Delta region in particular.

### **The Niger Delta**

The area that makes up the Niger Delta has been variously defined. Politically, it is the south-south geopolitical zone of Nigeria, comprising six states: Cross River, Rivers, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Edo and Delta. This zone constitutes the main centre of Nigeria's oil industry, with three distinct ecological zones, namely: the sandy coastal area, the freshwater and swamp area, and the dry land rainforest (Programme on Ethnic & Federal Studies [PEFS], 2004 a). However, since oil has become the determining factor, other oil-producing states like Ondo, Imo and Abia have been added. In the words of Onoweh (2003), "this latter-day classification is not so much of a geographical entity, but a political creation of the Nigerian state" (p. 25). The region, Onoweh adds, is rich in other natural resources like palm oil and kernel, herbal plants, fish, reptiles, monkeys, among others. Farming and fishing remain the major economic preoccupations of the people. Other handicrafts include hand-dug boats, salt making, and local gin distillation. It has been estimated that the Niger Delta has a population of 20 million, with about 50 ethnic groups, and over 3,500 communities who speak not less than 2560 dialects (Omoweh, 2003).

In terms of resource endowment, the Niger Delta region is the richest in Nigeria, accounting for 70% of the country's hydrocarbon resources, especially crude oil and natural gas (PEFS, 2004 b). Other attractive endowments include extensive forests, rich wildlife, and impressive cash crop output, especially rubber and palm oil. A host of strategic industrial establishments are also concentrated in the Niger Delta region by its resources content and proximity to the sea. These include a multi-billion naira integrated iron and steel plant at Owvian-Aladja, Nigerian Liquefied Natural Gas Limited (NLNG), two oil refineries at Warri and Eleme near Port Harcourt, two petrochemical plants, major power stations, a fertiliser

plant and an assortment of oil installations(PEFS, 2004 b). However, the two oil refineries mentioned here had gone into comatose for years.

Critically thinking, any conceptualisation of the Niger Delta leaves one with the issues relating to injustices against communities in the area vis-à-vis serious grievances of critical concerns, manifesting in exclusion, deprivation, despoliation, and fundamental problems of human rights violation, oppression, intimidation and domination(Albert, 2003 a). Bogey et al (2016) lend credence to the above when they opine that the Delta communities have not profited from the oil wealth, or at least they have not profited to the extent they had expected and would have perceived as just (Ubhenin, 2006). Ubhenin further asserts:

They felt neglected from a development point of view, and at the same time, they had to bear the environmentally and socially negative effects of oil production because government is largely absent in parts of the south of Nigeria and because oil companies do not have representatives on ground (Ubhenin, 2006 p. 16).

The indigenes have taken it upon themselves to agitate for their rights from the oil companies and the government of Nigeria. This may seem logical.

### **Current Realities in the Niger Delta Region**

The social conditions in the Niger Delta are quite appalling. Based on the 1995 World Bank Report on the level and pattern of poverty in the Niger Delta:

Despite its vast resources, the region remains poor. Group per capita is below the national average of US\$280. Unemployment in Port Harcourt, the capital of Rivers State, is 30% and is believed to be equally high in the rural areas. The rural population commonly fish or practice subsistence agriculture, and supplement their diet and income with a wide variety of forest products. Educational levels are below the national average and particularly low for women. While 76% of Nigeria children attend primary school, this level drops to 30-40% in some parts of the Niger Delta. The present level in the Niger Delta is exacerbated by the high cost of living. In the urban areas of Rivers State, the cost of living index is the highest in Nigeria (Iyayi, 2006 p. 61).

Aside the poverty level of the people of the Niger Delta, a close look at the menace posed by oil companies to the environment reveals that petroleum operations has engendered massive environmental pollution in the oil-producing areas of the Niger Delta. Specifically, there are cases of pipeline leakages, well blowouts, and spillages that have had severe effects on land, water resources, the micro-climate, and the residents. In the words of Olukayode Taiwo and Tade Akin Aina, quoting C.V. Izeogu, opine that the burrow pits dug in connection with storing the test samples or for other purposes destroy the land and scenery (Olukayode & Akin-Aina, 1991). Those pits, according to them, hold stagnant water which becomes breeding grounds for mosquitoes and frogs whose croaking can be heard from nearby houses (Olukayode & Akin-Aina, 1991).

Moreover, valuable agricultural land and settlements are lost to the burrow pits, which unimaginably reflect the hazards and degradation that the oil-producing areas have to contend with. These include the blowout of a well in Obagi, such that the tremors were felt 20 kilometres away, and the area polluted was 131.75 square kilometres (Olukayode & Akin-Aina, 1991). Spillage in Rumuekpe spread crude oil over about 25.14 hectares (Olukayode & Akin-Aina, 1991). Another blowout occurred at Apoi, such that by the early eighties, about 1,862 square kilometres of land had been polluted, including 362 square kilometres of coastal beaches, 70 square kilometres of estuary, and 163 towns and villages (Olukayode & Akin-Aina, 1991). It is imperative to point out that the spilt oil around well blowouts is toxic to most species of flora and fauna. For instance, the spills in Obagi, Omoka, and Forema destroyed farmlands, polluted community water resources, and destroyed fish in nearby ponds, as well as crops. In some instances, the spilt crude penetrated the soil to a considerable depth, up to 0.65 metres in some locations, and this invariably affected plant growth and the roots (Olukayode & Akin-Aina, 1991).

Nutritionally, water, which is essential to man's survival, is another critical resource that is badly affected by the oil industry operations. Spillage pollutes the creeks, swamps, and rivers on which most inhabitant depend for their domestic water supply. Even the drinking water from a domestic well is also affected through oil pollution of sand in the substrata (Olukayode & Akin-Aina, 1991). Closely linked with this is a peculiar pattern of health hazards observed in these areas. Such illnesses, which result largely from environmental pollution and

degradation, include: diarrhoea, dermatitis, conjunctivitis, and gastroenteritis (Olukayode & Akin-Aina, 1991).

Devastatingly, the effect of gas flares on vegetation and the microclimate of the area are equally searing. Studies of the effect of gas flares on vegetation show that a typical flare in the Port Harcourt region clears the ground for a radius of 30-40 metres. The dire consequence is that the area fringing the 'no life' zone has few birds and insects. Similarly, higher vegetation at a distance of more than one kilometre from the flare is either suppressed, scorched, or damaged, even after the composition of the ground herbs has become normal, or nearly so (Olukayode & Akin-Aina, 1991). In some quarters, gas flares have also been linked with acid rain as burning of gas produces acid, which falls and washes into the soil of surrounding areas. Acids cause soil nutrients to leach, and crops barely do well. Arguably, this variant of pollution has been known to engender root rot in cassava tubers, maize, and other farm crops at the fringes of the urban areas, and this may probably be responsible for the dwarfing of oranges, mangoes and bananas in the affected settlements.

Suffice it to say that the burning of gas in the inhuman environment of the oil-producing areas radiates heat into the immediate atmosphere, thereby raising the daily temperature beyond normal. In the words of Olukayode and Tade, this idea is aptly captured: "This is an untoward situation which creates health problems such as burning eyes and breathing impairment for residents" (Olukayode & Akin-Aina, 1991 p. 7).

Judging from the foregoing, it is crystal clear that, the Niger Delta region which seems to be the hen laying the golden eggs for Nigeria as a whole is extremely marginalised in terms of developmental goals. Neither the state nor the oil companies are helping matters. For instance, on the part of oil companies, the issue of corporate social responsibility comes to the fore; which is talking about the role multinational corporations have played in exacerbating the problem in the host communities. These multinational corporations have been indicted for supporting security agents in committing human rights abuses against the local people. Oftentimes, the corporations have largely supported development projects that have caused more social divisions and problems in the Niger Delta. A good example would be the building of roads to their facilities, roads that are of no use to the communities. Again, development projects have often been

undertaken based on demands from a community, rather than upon an assessment of this community (Böge et al., 2006).

The problems plaguing the host communities of the Niger Delta may have been aggravated by the role of the Nigeria state, its politics, and its mode of surplus extraction, which makes it possible for the oil corporations to indulge in such complicity and conduct their businesses in a manner that is not too clear. As a matter of fact, during the military era, the Niger Delta experienced what could be described as the worst state of repression, as extra-judicial killings, torture and incarceration were widespread. As Albert Isaac succinctly puts it,

In the Ogoni district, for example, it is estimated that between 1994 and the beginning of 1995, at least fifty Ogonis were summarily executed by security forces. Prominent among men was Kan Saro Wiwa of blessed memory. Surprisingly, too, the Obasanjo regime carried out massive military repression in towns of Choba and Odi in 1999 (Albert, 2003a).

As a catalyst to the problems of the Niger Delta, the initial incursion of the military approach embraced by the Obasanjo civilian government that was inaugurated in May 1999 only served to heighten anxiety and tension in the region. The devastation of the environment, which reached an unprecedented level during the period of military rule, has scarcely abated.

It is no gainsaying, that the level of development in the Niger Delta falls short of expectation in terms of its richness in natural resources endowment. No doubt, therefore, sustainable development is critical to the problem of the Niger Delta. Fundamentally, at the core of this is the security of the lives of the ordinary people of the region. By this, it means security of food, shelter, health, jobs and other social amenities to make life worth living. Besides state violence, undercutting livelihoods has also created anxiety, violence, conflicts, and insecurity in the region.

The Niger Delta, over the years, has witnessed significant levels of protest by the indigenous people of the communities. This is against the backdrop of resource exploitation activities by the multinational oil companies in their traditional homelands. On the other hand, the indigenous people have also, from time to time, carried out violent attacks against assets and personnel belonging to the

multinationals. In all these, violent conflict between the state security forces and indigenous groups, otherwise known as “*ethnic militia groups*,” has also been witnessed. As Imoukhuede rightly observed, the impact of these attacks on people, especially women, is high. He further stressed, that there are reported cases of women in Choba, Ogoni, and Odi who were gang raped by soldiers sent to restore peace in their communities (Imoukhuede, 2002).

The matter had become worse among the youths, who are the leaders of tomorrow. They have formed themselves into various kinds of militia groups, heavily armed with weapons of destruction, in their bid to demand and fight for greater control of their natural resources. Although the demand by the youths for accountability and responsible leadership is never out of place, the manner and the approach have been largely labelled as *restiveness*.

The Niger Delta episode should not be an exception from what is obtained elsewhere in the world. Acute conflict is a common problem between the state and indigenous people as a result of natural resource exploitation often carried out by multinational corporations, with encouragement and sanction by the state. However, on the other hand, if properly managed, the resolution would successfully pave the way for the attainment of good governance, conflict prevention, human rights, and sustainable management of natural resources endowment within a framework of social justice.

### **Methodology**

The study adopted a qualitative, descriptive-analytical design that examined only publicly available documents already cited elsewhere in the manuscript, including official inquiries and policy texts, constitutional-reform monographs, peer-reviewed environmental and governance studies, socio-economic briefings, contemporaneous newspaper reportage, and ecclesial commentaries such as papal statements on environmental stewardship and scriptural texts framing ethical obligations. Each document was read in full, entered into a coding matrix, and assigned descriptive labels under four a priori categories—amnesty, environmental degradation, sustainable development, and ecclesial response.

Constant comparison was then applied to cluster codes into higher-order themes such as resource-control grievances, corporate social-responsibility deficits, and the church’s role as moral arbiter, while verbatim extracts were preserved with

page or column identifiers to maintain traceability. Credibility was strengthened through triangulation across document types; dependability was ensured by an audit trail comprising coding sheets, analytic memos, and citation logs; confirmability was maintained by restricting interpretation to evidence explicitly contained in the sources; and transferability was supported by thick contextual description of the Niger-Delta setting. Because the analysis relied exclusively on secondary data, no human participants were involved, and formal ethics approval was unnecessary, yet interpretive restraint was exercised to respect the communities discussed. The sole reliance on documentary evidence limits access to first-hand narratives and real-time ecological measures, so the findings constitute an interpretive synthesis rather than empirical field evidence, a boundary acknowledged in the discussion and recommendations for future research.

### **Findings and Discussion**

The struggle of oil-producing communities against the federal government has no doubt intensified, such that the deepening of the economic crisis has further radicalised the struggle. The Niger Delta communities are no doubt demanding the restructuring of the federation in a manner that would give more autonomy to the states, a sort of self-determination within the federation. They also demand a return to the allocative principle of derivation to provide compensation for oil pollution of their environment. This demand can never be out of place within the context of social justice.

Even before now, far back in 1957, before independence, the colonial government had recognised the peculiar problems of the Niger Delta. Consequent upon this, the British colonial government set up the Willinks Commission on September 26, 1957, to recommend the best strategies for developing the area. However, the report submitted by the Willinks committee on August 18, 1958, failed to meet the expectations of the minority ethnic groups as it noted that the dismantling of the tripartite federal structure through state creation would “create more problems than it sought to cure”<sup>25</sup>. However, the commission in its report recommended that the Niger Delta area should be accordingly, treated as special because of its special problems and peculiar developmental needs.

Premised on the recommendation of the commission and the acknowledgement of the neglect of the region, the federal government created the Niger Delta

Development Board (NDDB) in 1962. For paucity of funding, the board did little or nothing to develop the Niger Delta, and it became moribund before the outbreak of the civil war in 1967. The next attempt at developing the Niger Delta by the federal government was the establishment of the River Basin Development Authority (RBDA) in 1976. The activities of this board, like the NDDB, yielded no tangible results. In fact, some sectors have described it as a fraud on the part of the federal government (Willink Commission, 1958).

The year 1992 witnessed the creation of another board named the Oil Mineral Producing Area Development Commission (OMPADEC). It was during the administration of General Babangida (Rtd.) that the board was created. He also raised the statutory allocation of mineral-producing areas to 3%, and the fund generated will be administered by the board. However, OMPADEC also had problems with mismanagement, corruption, and inconsistent policy. What do we have now? At present, Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) has replaced OMPADEC. Even the establishment of the Ministry of Niger Delta has failed to reduce the tension in the region.

The deprivation and arrogant treatment by the federal government of the oil-producing communities has engendered the feeling of neglect among the people of the Niger Delta region that they are perpetually disinherited and expendable as a people. This feeling has fostered disillusionment and critical attitudes against the federal government. These attitudinal changes are often expressed in the sabotage of pipelines, vandalism, hostage-taking of innocent oil workers, and hijacking of oil companies' helicopters, which are often released after a huge ransom payment, has been made. These series of hostage-taking and near-war situations in the region is a pointer to the discontentment in the oil-rich communities.

### **Amnesty as a panacea for sustainable development in the Niger Delta**

*The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines amnesty as an official act of forgiving people who have committed offences against the state and allowing them to go free (Hornby, 2010). However, there are always time frames for such a gesture. In the case of the militants of this aforementioned region, the amnesty granted them by the then Yar'Adua-led Federal Government of Nigeria expired on October 4, 2009 (*The Nation*, 2009 b). And so far, of all government interventions at solving the Niger Delta crisis, this has been more successful. *The*

*Nation Newspaper* reported that more than fifteen thousand gunmen had surrendered their arms (*The Nation*, 2009 b). The implication of this is that it will halt or at best bring to the barest minimum the level of pipeline vandalism, and in the process lead to an increase in oil output and the safety of the personnel.

Apart from the militants who are yielding to the amnesty granted to them, women in this region have also taken centre stage in the protest against the massive injustices being perpetrated by the state and the oil company against them. For instance, women and children from Ugborodo seized Chevron's tank farm and terminal in Escravos. In the past, women from Ijaw Oil Communities in Gbamurutu also invaded the NNPC/Chevron flow station. The Itsekiri women in Warri threatened to seal off all oil wells in the Niger Delta (*The Guardian*, 2002).

No doubt, sustainable development is critical to the problems of the Niger Delta, given the present condition of the region. A former Speaker of the House of Representatives, Honorable Dimeji Bankole spoke at a national conference on Niger Delta, hosted in Kaduna, where he acknowledged the historical exploitation of that region by the Nigerian nationhood and prescribed earnest amendment. He opined that:

If we are to be honest with ourselves, we have not been fair to the Niger Delta region. The Niger Delta has been producing the funds with which we have been running this country for many years. The funds we use to build Abuja where I came from this morning, those lovely roads and bridges and offices came from funds from Niger Delta. I have not seen such bridges and roads in the Niger Delta. Until those roads and infrastructures come to Niger Delta, we will continue to put the request on the front burner of Nigeria politics (*The Nation*, 2009 b).

This situation might be a pointer to the fact that it was just a matter of time before agitation and militancy reared their heads. However, militancy, as we now know it, took time to manifest. In the time of Isaac Adako-Boro and the environmentalist, Ken Saro-Wiwa of blessed memory who fought the Niger Delta cause and paid with their lives, agitation in the Niger Delta was not as pronounced then compared with the crops of militants before the granting of amnesty, by the former president, Alahaji Shehu Musa Yar'Adua of blessed memory.

To a considerable level, the amnesty and post-amnesty programme of rehabilitation and reconciliation will go a long way to give our former militants a new orientation about life in the same spirit in which Nigeria has been rebranded. The onus lies on the government to make haste while the sun shines. It is a fact that the militants have been disarmed. And it is equally true that the government has granted them amnesty and is pursuing their rehabilitation. However, the former militants are unhappy as the government seems to be moving rather too slowly for their liking. However, in some quarters it has been argued that unless the government succeeds in rehabilitating the former militants, there could be a swift return to violence and further oil supply disruption (*The Nation*, 2009 b).

### **The Niger Delta Experience: The Role of the Church**

No doubt the church cannot claim to be ignorant of the happenings in the Niger Delta region, which has become a national flashpoint, defined by various degrees of violence and other forms of aggressive behaviours. Critically speaking, there is general insecurity of lives in the Niger Delta of which the church is a great stakeholder. As a custodian and caretaker of God's creatures, "for the world and all that is in it belong to the Lord; the earth and all who live on it are his" (*Holy Bible*, Psalm 24:1, RSV). The Christians mostly populate the people of the Niger Delta, and as the people of God's family, the church has an obligation towards their spiritual growth. In the book of Genesis, after God had finished with all that He created, he made man to be in charge of all that he made. The Bible put it thus: "...replenish the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and fowl of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth" (*Holy Bible*, Genesis 1:28, RSV). Since the church is an integral part of the Niger Delta region, she is, therefore, bound to be affected either positively or negatively concerning the socio-political problem of the region.

The gains and the success of the Niger Delta are the gains of the church just as the problems of the Niger Delta are the problem of the church. As a result, the socio-economic reality of the Niger Delta should be of great concern to the church. In the words of Olanisebe Samson, "most of the Christian denominations, if not all, are experiencing the heat of the country's unhealthy socio-political and economic policies" (*The Catholic Herald*, 2010, p. 10). Within the context of the above assertion, the churches in the Niger Delta region cannot be exempted because there is no way that they will not be affected in the areas of great concern: such as

membership drive. As it is the ultimate goal of the church to make new converts daily, which will lead, in the long run, to an increase in payment of tithes and other stipulated financial obligations? For as long as the crisis lingers, it will affect the economic power of the church's members to meet the church's demands.

Another challenge the church may face is that it stands a big risk of losing her members to the stray bullets from the camps of the militants or the territories of the government agents. As we know, it is not a good omen for churches to be recording a decline in membership owing to death occurrence as it is currently happening in the Niger Delta before and after the granting of the amnesty. A war zone like the Niger Delta, devoid of peace, may not go without victims or casualties. If the bullet is not a respecter of a human person, it obviously cannot be a respecter of religion. This, therefore, implies that in an atmosphere of chaos, orchestrated by guerrilla warfare, no church can perform well. This is the direct opposite of the position of the church. The church should operate in a peaceful atmosphere, and this is only when it can perform her God's bestowed functions.

As a matter of fact, what is the church's attitude to the militants in practical terms? The greatest challenge confronting the church is the lack of concrete steps taken by it towards actualising the demands of the people, especially in the oil-rich region of the Niger Delta. Granted, the church, in most cases, preaches vibrantly against social injustices and lopsided policies of the government, but this is not enough. Since both the militants and non-militants alike are members of the church, likewise those in authorities, it behoves the church, therefore, to serve as a bridge builder by bringing together the warring parties. The militants, as members of the church, should be made to know what the scriptures say regarding being submissive to constituted authorities as one of the precepts of Christianity. On the other hand, the church should remind the authorities of their duties to the people. In these circumstances, the church will be seen to be championing the causes of the masses, to be the voice of the voiceless and the conscience of the people. The church also has the challenge of defending the truth and what is right in the sight of God in defence of the masses against any form of oppression, to the degree to which it does not hesitate to challenge that oppression with churchly weapons.

The circumstance in the Niger Delta today is dark and gloomy because the people living there are living in a world of darkness and helplessness and as such, they

need light. Towards this, the churches in the Niger Delta and the world over are hereby called upon to be a sign of light and direction in a world of darkness and sin. For a corrupt, violent, materialistic, hedonistic, and consumerist society, it behoves the church to shine out the light of holiness, love, purity of heart, mercy, kindness, and peace. This way, the church becomes the salt of the earth and the world's light.

More relevant to the issue at hand was the message the late Pope Benedict XVI delivered to mark the 43<sup>rd</sup> World Day of Peace on January 1, 2010, with the theme: *"If You Want Peace, Protect Creation, Environment."* The papal message underlines the fact that:

Protecting the natural environment is a challenge all people must face together, recognising they have obligation to respect a gift God created for all"<sup>36</sup>. He stressed further that, "the environment is God's gift to everyone, and in our use of it we have a responsibility toward the poor, toward future generations and toward humanity as a whole" (*The Catholic Herald*, 2010, p. 13).

While the encyclical focused on development and therefore discussed the need to share natural resources equitably and not exploit those found in poor countries like the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, it also insisted that there is a connection between environmental protection and peace. According to the Pope,

The stockpiling of natural resources, which in many cases are found in the poor countries themselves, gives rise to exploitation and frequent conflicts between and within nations. These conflicts are often fought on the soil of those same countries, with a heavy toll of death, destruction, and further decay (*The Catholic Herald*, 2010, p. 11).

In trying to analyse the Pope's message as the head of the church worldwide, a lot of lessons can be drawn in the light of the appalling predicament and the exploitative nature of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria with the characteristic nature of developing countries, whose constant mismanagement of the environment subsist because the people of Niger Delta region cannot assess the levels of degradation that oil extraction has inflicted on the environment.

In summary, the church seems to be the only institution that has been able to and should checkmate the wrong deals of those in government and the activities of government. In this way, religion will be seen as a potent instrument of nation-building.

### **Conclusion**

From the analysis undertaken so far, it is crystal clear that there is a strong link between oil and the crisis of Niger Delta, hence the quicker the better for Nigerians that the recognition and acceptance of the rights of the oil-producing minorities of the Niger Delta is imperative for democratic stability of the Nigerian state. The question is, should oil be a blessing or a curse to Nigeria? At present, the situation is such that resources accruing from the endowments of the Niger Delta region are used to develop other regions to the disadvantage of those that own the resources.

The current state of affairs in the Niger Delta is happening because the people of these areas are minorities, at the same time suffering from the dictatorship of the majority groups under the military and democratic dispensations. The crisis in the Niger Delta region cannot be resolved either by repression or the use of force; rather, it requires an open dialogue between all parties and by broadening the democratic space, to allow for the expression of the rights of the oil minorities. It is within the context as defined by trust, social equity, and democracy that the oil can be instrumental to the process of nation-building in Nigeria.

Inevitably, future peace lies in a non-violent approach to conflict management such as the noble gesture of the amnesty granted to the militants of the Niger Delta region. As currently witnessed on the part of the militant's readiness to arm disarmament and genuineness of heart with strong commitment on the part of the Federal Government of Nigeria, State Intervention in solving the Niger Delta crisis should be done to the extent of identifying best practices in the developed part of the world, where oil extraction has helped to prosper the local populations. With this faith, the peculiar circumstances of the entire people of the Niger Delta can be considered for bringing about sustainable development in the region.

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