

ENVIRONMENTAL POLLUTION AS A THREAT TO HUMAN SECURITY IN URHOBOLAND

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ABSTRACT

One of the manifest problems in the contemporary environmental crisis is environmental pollution. Environmental pollution is the injection into the atmosphere, land, or marine bodies of poisonous or unhealthy substances or elements. Some of the negative effects of environmental pollution are that it can lead to health problems, environmental degradation, climate change, degradation of social infrastructure, occupational hazards, and impede human security, which is necessary for people to obtain an optimal good life. While environmental pollution is present in almost every region of the world, there are places where it is common as a result of intensive oil exploitation and other industrial and human activities. One of such regions and places is the Urhoboland of Nigeria's Niger Delta. Environmental pollution in Urhoboland is precipitated or caused by some of the factors previously listed and many others. It has led to the destruction of biodiversity, and health hazards, and indeed limited the attainment of human security in the region. Through critical hermeneutics and analytic methods, this paper argues for the need to curtail or eradicate environmental pollution in Urhoboland and thus promote human security. The paper reveals that environmental pollution is occurring in Urhoboland and frustrating the attainment of full human security. The paper concludes that if environmental pollution is abated, it will help in promoting human security of the people of Urhoboland. And this can be possible by adopting effective legal and other measures to safeguard the environment and ensure human security.

Keywords: Environment, environmental pollution, human security, Niger Delta, multinational companies, Urhobo.

INTRODUCTION

Human security is crucially important for human beings to thrive and live meaningful lives. Without human security, human beings are extremely endangered in any environment. In general, human security can be understood as all that brings about safety and well-being, wellness, and welfare for human persons. Whatever brings harm to humans or that is against the welfare of human beings is a threat to human security. Numerous things and activities endanger human security such as terrorism, banditry, kidnapping, political assassination, hunger, starvation, malnutrition, various forms of modern-day slavery, racism, apartheid, social discrimination, police brutality, ethnicism, nepotism, cronyism, electoral violence and so on. While the things just mentioned may seem obvious in endangering human security, others seem

not obvious. This paper is thinking of a thing like environmental pollution. A person, for instance, may throw plastics into the water, it may not seem obvious that that act can pollute the waters, and endanger the lives of fish and marine animals on which human beings depend. But it does.

It is now recognized that: “Pollution is the largest environmental cause of disease and premature death. Pollution causes more than 9 million premature deaths, the majority of them due to air pollution. That is several times more deaths than from AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria combined” (World Bank Group, 2023, para 3). It is shown that air pollution that comes from industrial and vehicle emissions, and wildfire is the greatest external threat facing public health, and if the World Health Organization’s guidelines were followed, 2.3 years would be added to the life of the average person (Air Quality Life Index, 2023). Because of the devastating impact of pollution, it must be researched and studied. All pollution is environmental for it happens in the environment. No matter how many papers have been written on the subject matter, it is still worth researching, for it continues to pose a grave danger to human welfare and wellbeing. It is in this light that this paper studies environmental pollution as a problem to human security in Urhoboland. This paper aims to probe into the negative impact of environmental pollution and its effect on human security in Urhoboland and the Urhobo people of Nigeria. In carrying out the aims of the paper, conceptual clarifications are made, followed by an examination of human security in Urhoboland, and environmental pollution in Urhoboland. This will be followed by looking at environmental pollution as a threat to human security in the area. Then the way forward in outlining some recommendations will be offered, both from the legal and general perspectives. The methods adopted through the paper are analysis of the issues and hermeneutics (interpreting the issue for better understanding).

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

Environmental pollution (EP) can be defined as: “... any addition of erroneous substances or energies to the environment, that causes a change to the composition of the environment. These variables can be air, water, soil, noise, and light and changes to their natural values can have profound consequences for ecosystems and human life” (StudySmarter, 2025). According to the US Environmental Protection Agency, pollution is “any substances in water, soil, or air that degrades the natural quality of the environment; offends (the senses); causes a health hazard; or (impairs) the usefulness of natural resources” (Gordon, 2024, para 3). It could also be defined as the effect of undesirable changes that harm humans, animals, and plants as a result of the overconcentration of a substance beyond its natural abundance resulting from human activities (Khasanova, Alieva, and Shemilkhanova, 2023, p. 1-2). EP could also be defined as: “... the contamination of the physical and biological components of the earth/atmosphere system to such an extent that normal environmental processes are adversely affected;” or as defined by Obafemi in 2004, it is “... the process whereby various harmful substances are added to the environment (i.e. land, water, air, and the acoustic environment etc) by human and natural activities” (Obafemi, Eludoyin and Akinbosola, 2012, p. 233).

The next concept that requires clarification is human security. The human security approach privileges human beings as the subject of security, more than the security of states; and

emphasizes that individuals should be protected from traditional (military) and nontraditional threats to human well-being such as diseases, and poverty (Gregoratti, 2018). It is generally agreed that the concept of human security does not mean that national or state security is not important. But there can be no state security if the human beings in the state are endangered by or suffer from social, economic, political, and other deprivations. It is the Independent Commission on Disarmament and Security Issues in 1982 that first articulated the fact that security is beyond state security and argued it should be extended to individuals' welfare (Gregoratti, 2018). After the Cold War, it was realized among progressive scholars that the disappearance of superpowers did not necessarily bring about higher levels of security as there were still many other social problems confronting people in a globalized world; so in 1994, the United Nations Development Report enunciated that human security is focused on human life and dignity (Gregoratti, 2018). The report classified the threats against human security in seven forms (economic, community, environmental, health, food, political, and personal). Note that, "Human security and national security are complementary concepts and need not necessarily contradict each other. Both seek protection against harm. To organize and ensure human security, armed forces are necessary. To provide for national security, the removal of threats, at home and abroad, is needed" (Dorn, 2025, para 15). Also,

Human security, in its broadest sense, embraces far more than the absence of violent conflict. It encompasses human rights, good governance, access to education and health care and ensuring that each individual has opportunities and choices to fulfil his or her potential. Every step in this direction is also a step towards reducing poverty, achieving economic growth and preventing conflict. Freedom from want, freedom from fear, and the freedom of future generations to inherit a healthy natural environment -- these are the interrelated building blocks of human and therefore national security. (Annan, 2000)

This paper is concerned with the Urhobo people who predominantly live in Urhoboland in Nigeria's Niger Delta. They inhabit mainly the Western Niger Delta which is "...bounded by latitudes 5° 15' N and 6° N and longitudes 5° 40' E and 6° 25' E with an area of about 5,000 square kilometers" (Ojameruaye, 2007, para 7). They constitute more than 50% of the population in the Delta State of Nigeria, and much of the land is a flatland under 50 meters above sea level (Ojameruaye, 2004, para 7). The Urhobo people speak the Urhobo language as their native and indigenous language. Because of cultural diffusion, they also speak other languages today such as English, Pidgin English, French, etc. Urhoboland is one of the areas in the Niger Delta where oil has been discovered and where oil and gas resources are exploited. The Urhobo are considered the 5th largest ethnicity in Nigeria with a land blessed with abundant natural resources such as gas, oil, timber and other forest products, rivers, and many marine products (Erhiurhoro, 2024).

THE SITUATION OF HUMAN SECURITY IN URHOBOLAND

As a result of various industrial activities such as oil extraction and other resources from the land of Urhobo, both the natural environment and human lives are now endangered. Social problems such as poverty, invasion of farmlands by herdsmen due to open cattle grazing, waste mismanagement, armed robbery, kidnapping, etc have all endangered human security. There

are many threats to human security in Urhoboland. Human security is facing a lot of challenges and problems in Urhoboland. Being a part of the Niger Delta region, much of what is affecting the whole Niger Delta is also affecting Urhoboland. Emphasizing the threat of environmental pollution to human security in the Niger Delta, the following author asserts that:

It is important to note that in the Niger Delta, people are dependent on their natural environment as the traditional source of livelihood through agricultural activities like farming and fishing. However, issues of environmental pollution have become a significant threat to their means of survival. This has become a human security concern, as community members in the Niger Delta are vulnerable to the impacts of extractive-led development like exploration and exploitation activities in their community. (Siloko, 2024, p. 412)

There are many threats in contemporary times that cause human insecurities in Urhoboland. These threats include: herdsmen invasion of farmlands, armed robbery and kidnapping, petroleum fires, dilapidated roads, high cost of living and incessant rising prices of goods and services, mismanagement of waste, gender disparity and discriminations, interethnic and intra-ethnic conflicts, youth militancy, unemployment, etc. It should be recognized that:

Security is a very important aspect of all human societies and states. However, the traditional understanding of the term security is limited to the State Security alone at the expense of some important aspects that deal directly with the humans in the state. Issues like poverty, unemployment, corruption, child labour, kidnapping, etc. undermine the worth and dignity of human person; and their prevalence in any society becomes a human security threat. (Sajo, 2018, p. 144)

Can we find some of these issues that threaten human security in Urhoboland? Yes. For instance, in the past, Nigeria has been called the poverty capital of the world. There is still much poverty in Nigeria today. Urhoboland is part of Nigeria and is affected by poverty also. Poverty is high in Urhoboland land, with more than 70% of them living below the poverty line and many youths are unemployed, so crimes and criminality are common ravaging the land (Erhiurhoro, 2024).

In the past, there used to be constant clashes among people, especially youths of the ethnic groups of Urhobo, Ijaw, and Itsekiri regarding the city of Warri and its ownership. In 1997, there was an outbreak of violence over the relocation of the Local Government headquarters from Ogbe-Ijaw town to Ogidigben, an Itsekiri town, and also, in 1999, there were clashes in the city of Warri between Urhobo and Ijaw (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2001). While it is true that these conflicts in the city of Warri seem to have died down and there are no violent conflicts in the city due to the government implementing various measures to resolve the issues, the fact remains that the tensions have remained and people are always apprehensive that violence can erupt. There are occasional conflicts between Aladja an Urhobo town, and Ogbe-Ijaw town. In these conflicts, people have been killed and properties destroyed. Even among different Urhobo communities, especially those sharing common boundaries, conflicts have erupted. There is no doubt that conflicts, especially violent ones, make life insecure and impede human security.

The Nigerian federation is troubled. And this is why there are so many struggles for autonomy and self-determination. Agitations for either more autonomy or full self-determination have

come from groups like Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), Movement for the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), Ijaw Youth Congress, Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSSOP), Urhobo Progress Union, Oduduwa Nation, etc. The Nigerian federation privileges the three dominant ethnic groups of Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo to the detriment of other ethnic groups who are seen as minorities. Connected to these agitations is the movement for resource control, some of whose major champions are in Urhoboland, etc. The Urhobo people like some other ethnic groups in Nigeria are marginalized, economically raped, and suffer from deprivations of many of their individual and group rights as a result of failures of the Federal Government (Tareri, 2008). These socio-economic marginalizations that people suffer seem to cause a great deal of human insecurities across the country.

ENVIRONMENTAL POLLUTION AS A THREAT TO HUMAN SECURITY IN URHOBOLAND

Having outlined some of the aspects of human security above, it is now important to discuss some of the environmental pollutions in Urhoboland. Environmental pollutions have a lot of negative effects on society, and Urhoboland is not an exception. Some of the effects of environmental pollution include: climate change, human health, biodiversity, etc. Some major polluters of the environment are factories and industries. It should be noted that environmental pollution is not a new problem but today it appears to be humanity's greatest problem. Human activities like mining, industrialization, urbanization, and exploration all cause pollution (Khasanova, Alieva and Shemilkhanova, 2023).

In Urhoboland, one of the major causes of environmental pollution is sand dredging. There is hardly any part of Urhoboland that you go to that you will not find sand dredging sites by the beaches and rivers in the area. You drive along the Effurun-Ughelli-Evwreni road, facing Patani, you find dredging sites. On the Effurun-Eku Road, on the Effurun-Sapele Road, you also find dredging sites. As sand is being dredged, sand particles and other dust elements are being blown into the air and the environment. There is also the challenge with the big tippers that carry the sand. Many of them are rickety, and not road-worthy, and as they drive on the road they emit poisonous smoke from their exhaust pipes. Some are not properly covered and as they move, some of the sands fall away into the road, creating hazards on the road to other road users. And some of these dredgers go about their business without following the proper legal framework that guides their activities, especially with regards to the protection of the environment to ensure human security. Hence, it should be noted from the above that it is not only oil and gas exploration in Urhoboland that causes environmental pollution although it is the major factor. The level of pollution in Urhoboland is very high and increasing and this is attributable to many factors: absence of urban sewer system, improper waste management, lack of adequate disposal system, unreliability of public water supply, burial of people in homes, burning of refuse, rickety motor vehicles, generator use, and refinery and petrochemical factory in Ekpan (Ojameruaye, 2004, sec. 4.5). In all these, people should follow the legal frameworks laid down by the government fully.

There is no doubt therefore that environmental pollution poses a threat to human security in various ways. Let us continue to examine this issue from some of the core areas or domains

that the United Nations pointed out as aspects of human security. Economic well-being is an important aspect of human security and human life. Without basic economic well-being, such as having food, water, and shelter, life becomes burdensome. Social infrastructure such as roads, airports, railways, electricity, and water supply, are necessary for people to have the optimal good life. Environmental Pollution seriously affects economic well-being. Oil spillage and oil exploration activities destroy sources of food such as farmlands, pollute sources of drinking water, and make it unsafe, and poisonous gases from gas flares corrode people's roofs. In searching for oil, oil companies cut down trees, and forests, and blast through people's farmlands and backyards. In Urhoboland in some of the places where oil companies drill for oil, you see pipelines crisscrossing people's farmlands. All these endanger people's farmlands. Some years ago there was a petroleum fire near the bridge at Okpare in Ughelli South Local Government Area, in which the palm trees and other economic trees and people's farms were burnt down. Till the present moment, you can see that many of the trees in the area are yet to recover and grow to cover the land. Some other petroleum fire disasters have happened in Urhoboland in places like Jesse and so on.

Then there is the community dimension to human security. Human life is lived in a community and has a social dimension. Among African societies and other indigenous places, community life is highly esteemed and valued. You are not a person if you cannot participate in community life by being a person of good character and making contributions to community life and development. Pollution in whatever form negatively affects the land, marine bodies, and the atmosphere. A community does not exist in a vacuum or outer space. Community exists among people in a territory, though some communities can be trans-territorial. Pollution can lead to fragmentation among community members as they are stressed and experience trauma over the effects of pollution. Communal well-being is important for adequate human flourishing. In Warri and Ekpan effluents released from the refinery in Ekpan have affected both the atmosphere and water, causing harm to human health (Obafemi, Eludoyin and Akinbosola, 2012, p. 238).

Perhaps the most crucial aspect of environmental pollution is that it affects the natural, built, and even social environment. In pollution, dangerous substances and elements are emitted into the atmosphere, land, and even water bodies that possess those aspects of the environment. Pollution remains one of the greatest dangers to a healthy environment and human security. When the environment is polluted, human life becomes insecure, fragile, and vulnerable to sickness and diseases. Pollution can cut human life short, hence reducing people's life span. The effects of pollution can be extremely devastating. Keep the following in mind:

Pollution of all types hinders development outcomes. Air pollution, exposure to lead and other chemicals, and hazardous waste including exposure to improper e-waste disposal, cause debilitating and fatal illnesses, create harmful living conditions, and destroy ecosystems. Pollution stunts economic growth, exacerbates poverty and inequality in both urban and rural areas, and significantly contributes to climate change. Poor people, who cannot afford to protect themselves from the negative impacts of pollution, end up suffering the most. (World Bank Group, 2023, para 2)

Pollution also has serious effects on the health of the people. It has made people sick. Gas flaring is a serious cause of environmental pollution. Realize that: “A variety of pollutants are discharged during gas flaring and these are detrimental to animals and the environment. These pollutants are linked to a range of adverse health impacts including cancer, neurological, reproductive and developmental effects. Furthermore, some of the pollutant-chemicals such as sulphur-dioxide cause environmental issues including acid rain as well as the production of greenhouse gases and these contribute to climate change” (Obi, Bwititi, and Nwose, 2021, p. 1).

There is an equally political dimension to human security. Human beings are social and political by nature. They live in a political society, no matter how small the society may be. Politics relates to the struggle for power for the management of the resources and infrastructures of society. In political disorder, it is difficult for human beings to live their lives to the full. Environmental pollution can lead to the degradation of social infrastructures, which are vital for maintaining order in political society. When people get sick due to environmental pollution, it affects their decision-making and active participation in political society.

Personal welfare and well-being are also vital aspects of human security. Security is not just the security of groups and collectives. Internal and mental well-being is important in people securing their lives. In various ways as noted above, environmental pollution does affect the health and wellbeing of individuals. Think of people in Urhoboland who live under 24-hour gas flaring. They are exposed to the flares and the fires that come from the flares. They are subjected to health stress as a result of their constant inhaling of poisonous gas.

THE WAY FORWARD IN AMELIORATING ENVIRONMENTAL POLLUTION IN URHOBOLAND

Human security is crucial for the welfare and wellbeing of people in Urhoboland, and elsewhere. This is because it hinges on the question of human rights and dignity. Whatever harms any of the dimensions of human security affects the quality of life that people can live and their livelihood. It is important then in Urhoboland that environmental pollution is curbed and eradicated or reduced to the barest minimum. There is indeed no way some human activities will be carried out when there will be no pollution at all. The argument here is that even in these cases it should be reduced to the barest minimum. Many things can be done to eliminate or reduce environmental pollution in Urhoboland and secure the security of people in Urhoboland land.

Educating and creating awareness of environmental pollution is crucial. While some pollution is caused by individual and private groups, a great deal of pollution is caused by the extractive and exploitation activities of corporate companies like oil and gas companies. Concerning individuals, they should be educated on the negative implications of polluting the environment. They should be made aware of the need to cultivate healthy environmental habits. These habits include proper disposal of domestic waste and waste generated in marketplaces. They should be educated on the need not to throw away dirt and garbage on roads, streams, and bushes. The educational curriculum in Urhoboland should be re-jigged and reformed. Even though the curriculum comes from a higher authority outside the area, the government at both Federal and

State levels should ensure that in subjects such as history, social studies, civics education, government, economics, etc, issues of environmental protection are discussed and taught. Religious bodies and other non-governmental bodies also must ensure that they promote environmental awareness in their programs. In the Rio Declaration, it is stated in Article 10 as follows:

Environmental issues are best handled with the participation of all concerned citizens, at the relevant level. At the national level, each individual shall have appropriate access to information concerning the environment that is held by public authorities, including information on hazardous materials and activities in their communities, and the opportunity to participate in decision-making processes. States shall facilitate and encourage public awareness and participation by making information widely available. Effective access to judicial and administrative proceedings, including redress and remedy, shall be provided. (United Nations, 1992, p. 2)

Many in Urhoboland are not even aware of the environmental pollution taking place on the land and the negative effects that it has on the land and the people. Pollution will not simply end or be mitigated when the government and companies. There is also the pollution caused by individuals, small and medium businesses, and non-governmental bodies. It is crucial then that all are involved in cultivating healthy environmental habits that reduce pollution.

Oil and gas companies and other companies have a corporate duty to ensure that they carry out their activities, reducing their negative impact on the environment. In many other parts of the world, gas flaring has been stopped. But in Nigeria, it is painful to note that there is still gas flaring. The government has made many laws in the past to stop gas flaring; these laws must be enforced and implemented.

Some air pollution and degradation of the environment in Urhoboland is caused by sand dredging. While it is true that some form of land dredging is necessary, many who dredge sand have no measures in place to curtail air pollution, and the transporters who transport sand from the dredging site to where they are needed, employ rickety tippers in the process. These tippers pollute the air with carbon dioxide from their exhaust fumes. There should be stricter regulations by the government. Vehicle inspection officers (VIO) and Road Safety officers should ensure enforcement of vehicle safety laws.

Government officials should ensure that they enforce laws guiding oil exploration and other natural gifts in Urhoboland. It appears that oil multinationals have taken advantage of the lack of political will on the part of some governmental administration to enforce environmental laws in Nigeria and punish defaulting firms to perpetuate unacceptable and sharp practices as it concerns environmental safety and human security (Ogbonnaya, 2011). This environmental crisis has over the years engendered unprecedented level of poverty among the people of the region and a general underdevelopment of the region. Of many extant laws on these activities the government seem not effectively employ these laws in order to ensure human and environmental security.

There must be deliberate efforts, especially on the part of government to end pollution or reduce it to the barest level required by the World Health Organization. Funds to tackle air pollution

are extremely low compared with than invested into treating malaria, HIV/AIDS, and other health threats yet the fact is that air pollution reduces people's life span than these health problems; and it should be noted that the whole of Africa receives less than \$300,000 to combat air pollution (Air Quality Life Index, 2023). A place in Africa where you have some of the highest levels of air pollution is the Niger Delta, in which Urhoboland is located. The problem is very serious in Urhoboland because there are oil wells in the area, and a lot of drilling for oil and a lot of gas flaring takes place there. There is a serious need for government to pay more attention to Urhoboland and other communities in the Niger Delta.

CONCLUSION

The paper has examined the issue of environmental pollution as a threat to human security in Urhoboland. It showed that environmental pollution is humanity's greatest challenge. Environmental pollution is the release into the atmosphere or other environment of poisonous substances or elements that are undesirable for the health of the environment. In Urhoboland, environmental pollution has been caused by oil and gas exploitation, gas flaring, industrial activities, sand dredging, mismanagement of waste, rickety vehicles, and many other factors. All these the paper indicated have negatively impacted the state of human security in the region.

In Urhoboland, people are living painful and difficult lives as a result of environmental pollution. There is a need as discussed above for ecological solutions to promote the state of human security in the region. Among the solutions that the paper proposed are creating environmental awareness/education to enable people to help avert pollution, oil and gas companies taking responsibility to mitigate pollution, government enforcing strict environmental laws, and more funding to curb pollution. Hence, government at all levels should reassert stringent enforcement of environmental laws in Nigeria to punish adequately all defaulting firms involved in environmental pollution in carrying out their activities, whether it is oil spillage, sand dredging or gas flaring. Hence, all existing environmental laws should be reviewed to fill any existing legal lacuna (if any) which these firms have taken advantage of to continue to perpetuate sharp practices against ecological safety practices. The government can achieve these through the concerned agencies like the Federal and State Ministries of Environment, and many other environmental agencies, who are saddled with the responsibilities of enforcing environmental laws in Nigeria, and these agencies should be well funded. This paper expects that if these solutions are put in place, they will help to promote not only human security in Urhoboland but a safer environment for all inhabitants of the ecosystem.

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