

ETHICAL CHALLENGE OF WATER (IN)SECURITY IN URHOBOLAND OF NIGERIA

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Abstract

A basic necessity of life without which human beings normally cannot survive for more than a week is water. Water is crucial to human cultures and civilizations. Because it is necessary to secure human life, ecosystems and everything in existence, water is a human right. Because of the various threats and dangers that face equitable access to water, and sustainably having water, it has become necessary to speak of water security. While water security is a challenge in many regions of the world especially in the so-called developing regions of the world, water security is a serious issue in Urhoboland of Nigeria's Niger Delta. This paper uses a critical analytic method to examine the situation of water security in Urhoboland and the way forward in promoting water security in Urhoboland. The paper discovers that there is water insecurity in Urhoboland caused by many factors such as oil and gas exploitation causing pollution, the activities of herdsmen, poor water education, etc. The paper concludes that it is an ethical imperative to promote water security in Urhoboland.

Keywords: Ethics, challenge, water, security, water security, Urhobo, Nigeria, Niger Delta.

Introduction

Water remains one of the most important necessities of life. While one can survive without food and other commodities for many days and weeks, one cannot survive without water for more than a week, as Klaver (2009) indicates. Sustainable Water Partnership (2022) states that:

Water fuels every aspect of life. It's essential for basic health and hygiene, and it drives society's most essential industries: agriculture, energy and transportation. Without water security there can be no national security. In fact, water is essential to the stability of every country on the planet. Understanding water security means looking beyond immediate supply to political, economic, social and environmental impacts.

Water is important and is one of the sustainable development goals: clean water and sanitation (goal 6). Klaver (2009) writes that the pulse of life and rhythm is enhanced by water and water moves in all living entities, water is crucially vital to life and human

culture. Klaver (2009) shows further that all human civilizations were virtually built around water such as China, Mesopotamia, India, Peru, Mexico, and Rome; and many music, poetry, and religion through the ages are filled with images of water. In the biblical account of creation, all life comes from water. It is from the primeval chaotic waters that God's spirit moves and creation is called forth. For the Greek philosopher Thales, everything comes from water and is made of water. Many of the great miracles and mysteries in the bible are built on water.

As a basic necessity of life, every human being needs water, and clean water for that matter. Human rights instruments are clear that access to water is a human right. Despite the importance of water, many people in our world have no access to clean and healthy water. Globally there is water insecurity in places like Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Yemen, Afghanistan, Nigeria's Niger Delta and many other regions of the world. In many of these places, it is as a result of war and terrorism, poverty, massive underdevelopment, bad governance, and activities of mining and extractive industries that have no regard for environmental rights and human well-being. National Intelligence Council's Strategic Futures Group (2021) lists Nigeria as one of those countries that will experience declining water security and much of this water insecurity will come from increasing demand, conflicts, corrupt and weak government, pollution, and scarcity. Urhoboland that this paper is concerned about is within Nigeria and in the Niger Delta which is often crippled by oil and resource conflicts, polluted water, and also poor local leadership.

The concern of this paper is with Urhoboland in Nigeria's Niger Delta. The paper argues that there is massive water insecurity in Urhoboland. In carrying out the purpose of this paper, the basic concepts that ground the paper will be examined, then the situation of water insecurity will be looked at also. Thereafter the way forward in promoting water security will be examined before the paper is brought to a conclusion. The method used in this paper is critical analysis.

Conceptual Clarifications

Concepts requiring clarification in this paper are ethical challenges, water security, water insecurity, and Urhoboland. Ethics is concerned with right and wrong human behaviours. Ethics studies human conduct. It is concerned with the laws, rules, regulations, and standards by which people govern themselves to see what they see as right or wrong. The word challenge refers to what is puzzling for humans, what is problematic, what is difficult to solve, or what poses as an obstacle. An ethical challenge refers to what poses a problem or difficulty for human conduct or behaviour. An ethical challenge could be a dilemma that makes it difficult for people to act rightly and well. When people act rightly or conduct themselves in the presence of that moral dilemma then they have acted rightly

and justly. The ethical challenge of water security means that when water is not secured or there is a situation of insecurity in having clean and healthy water, then there is a problem or puzzle that human beings need to overcome or solve.

According to Abolurin (2011a), security is: "...the state of being safe and protected. It is the provision for a sense of protection against loss, damage, or harm of both non-living entities and living or man (value resources)" (p. 3). Abolurin (2011b) states that the traditional school of thought restricted security to the national or statist definition that sees security as protecting the state from external aggression, while the non-traditionalist sees environmental, economic, and social threats that endanger people's lives as also issues of security. For Adebowale (2019) security refers to freedom from threats of violence, dangers, threats, and all situations that are hostile to human lives and their properties. Security is about people and the conditions that enhance their development, progress, and prosperity. But today there is also talk of the security of non-human entities and organisms in nature. Water security is ensuring that the substance or element called water is protected from contamination, harm, and pollution and that people have equitable access to water to live their lives sustainably. Sustainable Water Partnership (2022) defines water security as: "the adaptive capacity to safeguard the sustainable availability of, access to, and safe use of an adequate, reliable and resilient quantity and quality of water for health, livelihoods, ecosystems and productive economies." United Nations (2013) states that water security is:

The capacity of a population to safeguard sustainable access to adequate quantities of acceptable quality water for sustaining livelihoods, human well-being, and socio-economic development, for ensuring protection against water-borne pollution and water-related disasters, and for preserving ecosystems in a climate of peace and political stability (p. 1).

Burge (2024) states that water security is more than the availability of water, it is also about its protection from depletion and contamination, equitable distribution, and sustainable management. Related to the concept of water security is water insecurity. It is important to know the meaning of this concept for it will also be used often in this paper. StudySmarter (2024) defines water insecurity as a result of inadequate access to clean and safe water to maintain a productive and healthy life, and this issue is a global one as population increases necessitate higher demand for water and more industrial and agricultural facilities to take care of human needs. The fact is that as more industries are set up, they also end up causing pollution in the process of managing their solid and chemical waste. Thus, creating more water insecurity. Cushing et al (2023) state that water insecurity is when there is no sufficient quality and quantity of water to support human health, ecosystems, livelihoods, and production. Schimpf and Cude (2020) state that: water insecurity refers to "... inadequate or inequitable access to clean, safe and affordable water for drinking, cooking and sanitation and hygiene. As an ideal and

opposite state, 'water security' describes the conditions where water quality, quantity and access are enough to protect public health” (p.1).

The Urhobo people are the largest ethnic group in Delta State of Nigeria. Delta State is located in the geo-political region of the south-south of Nigeria. Ojaide (2022) as at the time of his writing notes that the Urhobo people number about five million people, while a bulk of them are in Delta State, some can be found in Bayelsa State of Nigeria; and they live in a landscape of rain forest, mangrove swamps and in an environment that is filled with many streams and rivers. Arodovwe (2022) states that the Urhobo people occupy 10 of the 25 local governments in Delta State and some are also in Warri South and Patani Local Government Areas of the State, and many Urhobo people have migrated to Ondo and other Western states of Nigeria. It is a well-known reality that like other groups of people there are sons and daughters of Urhobo in the Diaspora in North America, Europe, Asia, etc. Urhoboland is blessed with abundant oil and gas resources. They are located politically in Delta Central of Delta State. There is abundant natural water in Urhoboland but many of the water bodies have been polluted by the effects of oil exploitation.

The situation of Water Security in Urhoboland

Burge (2024) notes the importance of water security such as health promotion, food production, ecosystem preservation, social and economic stability, resilience against climate change, etc. Urhoboland which is located in Nigeria's Niger Delta has an abundance of water resources and water bodies, besides the water that comes from rains that are often abundant, especially in the rainy seasons from about March to October. Years ago, it was easy to predict the rainy season in Nigeria, but today it has become difficult, for rains have been witnessed in months such as December and January that traditionally were in the hearts of the dry season. Forae (2022) writes that the equatorial conditions of the area precipitate heavy rainfall which varies between 2500mm in the mainland and 3500mm in low-lying areas from June and October, and at times there are heavy thunderstorms causing floods; and many rivers have also been formed in the area such as Warri, Ethiope, etc.

One major challenge for water security in the region is the activities of oil and gas companies. Their exploration and exploitation of oil and gas have produced degraded land and polluted water and streams. Many rural villages and towns in Urhoboland depend on the streams and rivers in the land for water. Unfortunately, those water bodies and the land have been contaminated by oil spillage, oil bunkering, petroleum fires, gas flaring, excavation of farmlands to lay pipelines, etc.

Fishing used to be a major occupation in Urhoboland. The many rivers in Urhoboland make it conducive for fishing and other water-related activities. Through fishing, many earned a living and were secure in society. Water security is also about water being available for human beings to meet their genuine needs in society. But when

the water is polluted, human security is also impeded. Forae (2022) has noted that in Urhoboland, "Fishing was carried out in the fresh and brackish waters and occasionally in large rivers" (p.240). Fishermen and women caught different species of fish in the area. The rivers and other water bodies also facilitated transportation and trading activities. Growing up many years ago, this present author remembers Ijaw and other traders of ethnic groups paddling their canoes to Ughelli market with fish, etc. In towns like Okwagbe and other riverine areas, you can still see a lot of transportation through the waters to trade. Aweto (2005) writes that: "Fishing is important in the main streams and rivers, especially, the Ethiope, Kiagbodo and Warri. Nets and other fishing gears are used for fishing. Traps are also widely employed"(p. 692). Unfortunately, as Aweto (2005) writes further:

As a result of pollution of streams and rivers by crude oil during oil spills, mainly resulting from lapses by oil producing companies, the fishery resources of many rivers have been decimated. This has rendered fishermen jobless and they have to migrate to cities such as Warri and Sapele in search of jobs, there by worsening social problems in the towns(pp.692-693).

Water insecurity coming from the pollution of water bodies can lead to other social problems. This is why the rivers, streams, and water bodies must be protected from environmental damage and harm. Ekuerehare (2007) notes that while Urhoboland has many rivers and these were the basis for the work of many fishermen and the rivers also provided a base for trading along the towns on the banks of the rivers and fish were abundant and people were able to meet their protein needs, people lived long and healthy lives as cost of living was low, but he notes that oil discovery has changed that as oil exploration has polluted the waters and streams. As Ekuerehare (2007) notes further much of the water and soil has become unproductive and infertile as drilling chemicals and oil spills pollute the land; and gas flaring has precipitated acid rain depleting the ozone layer.

Water has also been contaminated by human beings who dump their refuse and garbage into streams and rivers without caring about the consequences. A major source of water insecurity in Urhoboland is water pollution. On pollution, Stranks (2008) writes that: "Pollution of streams, groundwater and other basic water sources, such as wells, implies that the polluting agents could eventually enter the public drinking water supply unless appropriate purification measures are taken" (p. 469). Stranks (2008) also states that: "Water distribution systems may also be a cause of contamination from the actual metal pipes, such as lead and copper pipes"(p.469). Because of a lack of proper awareness, there are households that you go to in Urhoboland where the water pipes are rusty, broken, and filled with dirt. These are all sources that contribute to the pollution of water and create water insecurity. Narayanan (2007) points out that anthropogenic activities are a major source of pollution as human beings discharge their sewage into the

environment, causing effluents and domestic and industrial waste to be dumped into the environment. Some people and groups take care of their sewage and waste properly, but others do not. A walk through streets and residential areas in Urhoboland, you will be shocked to see raw sewage from houses dripping into the open gutters and roads.

Another thing that has also affected water security in Urhoboland is soil erosion and flooding. Some years back there was massive flooding of the River Niger and this drastically affected some of the tributaries of the Niger in Urhoboland. Towns and villages were invaded with polluted waters from the River Niger. Wells dug by people to fetch water and taps and boreholes were all contaminated with the water from the River Niger. Not only did many people lose their farmlands, properties, and water resources, but people became ill and suffered from various ailments as a result of unhealthy water that they drank.

The activities of herdsman have also produced water insecurity in the area. Herdsman not only destroy water sources with the defecation from their cattle but some also rape, kill and maim people in the forests in Urhoboland. Because of this, many persons cannot access their water wells, taps, water tanks, etc.

It will be difficult to speak of water security without considering the issue of human population. Much water is needed by human beings for their well-being and survival. The more the human population increases the more water is endangered. Population increase in Urhoboland comes from various factors such as more births, the influx of people into the area, etc. A community in which fewer people live needs less water.

Water insecurity creates a lot of problems for society. National Intelligence Council's Strategic Futures Group (2021) states that water insecurity will precipitate the rise of diseases, higher inequality, poor economic performance, and political instability. Water insecurity in Urhoboland has caused people such as fishermen and women to lose their means of livelihood, risk of diseases, poor sanitation, and unhygienic conditions. Due to water insecurity in the form of polluted water and degraded land, the basic human rights of people in Urhoboland such as the right to life, right to dignity, and right to movement have all been impeded. It is right to say that polluted streams and rivers hamper water transportation, trading, leisure, and tourism.

Way Forward in Promoting Water Security in Urhoboland

Water needs to be ethically managed for the good of society in the area. This can be done in various ways. Burge (2024) writes that water security can be promoted by efficient use of water, infrastructural investment, ecosystem conservation, recycling and reuse of water, legislation, community engagement, etc. Water is rightly an ethical issue. It is not just a matter of technology, science, or economics. The way human beings treat water is

an ethical matter. Preventing other human beings from having access to water is an ethical matter. Poor environmental governance and corrupt leaders who siphon money that should be used for development projects such as the provision of clean and portable water to people is a matter of ethics and morality. The government should be at the forefront of realizing goal 6 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and safeguarding the human rights of people to water everywhere, including Urhoboland. Aderson et al (2008) write that water is an ethical issue for “the water crisis requires an attitudinal change, a renewed conservation ethic. We need to learn-or relearn-to regard water as precious, some would say even sacred” (p.452). The Nature Conservancy (2024) notes that: “Water insecurity is one of the greatest risks to global prosperity. Global water consumption has doubled every 20 years, and by 2025, at least two-thirds of the world's population will likely be living in water stressed areas”(p.1). This is one of the reasons why it is a critical ethical issue. Human survival and prosperity depend on it. Human life on earth matters. Ethics concerns human behaviours in terms of right and wrong. What is right is ethical and moral. What is not right is unethical. If human beings live in such a way that they pollute waters and many people especially poor people cannot access water then it is unethical. It offends against human dignity when there is no water. Human beings need water to sustain their dignity.

There is a need for more practice of the ethics of communalism in the area. Urhobo people like other African people strongly affirm a communitarian lifestyle. They believe in sharing and solidarity of coming to the help of one another. The common practice of people creating pipe-borne water and installing a tap by their fences where others can come and fetch water without paying should be encouraged. In a land in which almost every water body is polluted, there is a need for more pipe-borne water to become more readily available. Hospitality and sharing are hallmarks of every African people, including the Urhobo people. By sharing water, water security is promoted. Traveling through Urhoboland, you can see people who have built water taps on their fences to provide water to others freely. This is crucially important and worth commending.

There is also a need for water or water security education. There are people in Urhoboland who lack awareness of the crucial importance of their habits to water. Some people pollute water bodies without thinking of the effects on others. With water education, they will know that they should not pollute their streams and water with their garbage. People will also be mindful of the kind of water that they drink. They will use local means available and other means to purify the water that they drink. People will shun the wastage of water. They will learn more effective and efficient use of water. Water management is important to water sustainability. This education needs to emphasize the sacred and spiritual dimension of water. African indigenous thought has much to say about water. It is painful that a Western-influenced and informed system of education that is still prevalent in Urhoboland and much of Africa pays little attention to indigenous environmental knowledge and sacral values. The United Nations (2007) has recognized the rights of indigenous people to promote their indigenous spiritual and environmental values. Any education that fails to take into

cognizance the values of the locality in which it is done lacks much to be desired.

Political will also matters in this matter of managing water for security in Urhoboland. Klaver (2009) writes that creating sustainable water policies will require government intervention as much water is polluted, wasted, misallocated, and drained. Urhoboland is part of Delta State in the Federal Republic of Nigeria. There should be more robust state and federal policies on water that are pro-people and pro-poor that should benefit the area. Klaver (2009) writes that: "...many African and Asian women and girls spend hours a day walking to get water, an activity that severely reduces their participation in other productive activities, including education" (p.393). Much of Urhoboland is still rural and women and girls have to trek into the forests and bush to fetch water. This is an area where government at every level can do more to provide more pipe-borne water and public water. Much pollution of water that creates water insecurity is caused by oil and gas companies. Only the government can regulate forcefully the activities of these companies. They should be held accountable for any pollution of water bodies. And they should be made to pay heavy compensation.

Speaking of government, public health officers have an enormous role to play in education on public health and also enforcing public health laws. There should be more water safety laws and regulations in Urhoboland. Stranks (2008) opines that: "Protection of public water supply from chemical and bacteria contamination has always been one of the principal areas of public health practice" (p.469). In many areas in Nigeria, including Urhoboland you would wonder if there are public health officers. They are often not visible and their presence is not felt. Streets, roads, and markets in Urhoboland are filled with decomposing solid waste.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the issue of water security in Urhoboland. It defined water insecurity as non-availability or inadequate access to clean and healthy water for human livelihoods, security, and ecosystemic health. It was clearly shown that there is water insecurity in Urhoboland as a result of polluted water arising from the activities of oil and gas companies, the activities of killer herdsmen, poor management of domestic and industrial waste, etc. The paper argued that water security is an ethical issue that concerns human welfare and the well-being of ecosystems. Human beings in Urhoboland and elsewhere need an ethical re-orientation to see the value in water and the need to work for water security. Water security can be enhanced through water security education, good government policies that curb oil and gas pollution, good management of domestic and industrial waste, restraining the activities of killer herdsmen, etc. If the way forward proposed in this paper is implemented it will help to create more water security in Urhoboland of Nigeria.

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