Sustaining the Gains of HYPREP Remediation in Ogoni: A Community Focus

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Abstract

Since the 2016 flagged-off of soil remediation in Ogoni, the Hydrocarbon Pollution Remediation Project (HYPREP) has concluded work in at least sixteen (16) remediation sites across the four local government areas of Eleme, Gokana, Khana and Tai. This is part of twenty-one (21) Lots in phase 1 batch 1 of the Project work performance status published in December 2021. Thus, the efforts of Government in addressing the environmental issues in Ogoniland and other parts of the Niger Delta in general should be sustainable. What becomes of the gains of HYPREP soil remediation after the exercise is of concern to this paper. Using the Stakeholders theory, the study argues that preservation of a healthy environment and ecological balance is everybody's concern. To promote environmental awareness among the people, the need for active and sustainable involvement of the various stakeholders is important to sustainable environmental remediation. These stakeholders are the host and impacted communities, public, media, environmental groups, corporations and the government. The study uses both primary and secondary sources of data based on a qualitative research design in drawing conclusion that community engagement must be sustained in a manner that outlived the remediation project/clean-up. The study recommends mass sensitization and mobilization of the locals on the aftermaths of the project, what to expect and such friendly environmental disposition which may engender a sustainable healthy environmental and ecological balance in Ogoniland and beyond.

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2009, the Federal Government of Nigeria [FGN] invited the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) to conduct a scientific investigation of oil spill contamination in Ogoniland, Rivers State. UNEP's field observations and scientific investigations reported that oil contamination in Ogoniland is widespread and severely impacting many components of the environment. The report concluded that pollution of the soil by petroleum hydrocarbons in

Ogoniland is extensive in land areas, sediments and swampland. Most of the contaminations are from crude oil although contamination by refined product was found at some locations.

The UNEP report further reveals that there is no continuous clay layer across Ogoniland, exposing the groundwater in Ogoniland [and beyond] to hydrocarbons spilled on the surface. In 49 cases, UNEP observed hydrocarbons in ground water and in soil depths of at least 5m. The Ogoni community by this report is exposed to petroleum hydrocarbons in outdoor air and drinking water, sometimes at elevated concentrations. They are also exposed through dermal contacts from contaminated soil, sediments and surface water. This finding has major implications for the type of remediation required as oil spill contaminations exceed Nigerian national standards, as set out in the Environmental Guidelines and Standards for the Industries in Nigeria [EGASPIN]. At the time (2009), immediate concerns were community members at Nisisioken Ogale in Eleme Local Government Area where the team observed they were drinking water from wells that is contaminated with benzene, a known carcinogen, at levels over 900 times above the World Health Organisation [WHO] guideline. It was this report that stated that the level of contamination warrants emergency action ahead of all other remediation efforts.

The UNEP report on Ogoniland was submitted to the Federal Government of Nigeria in 2011. Five years later, on 2nd June, 2016 the Ogoni Clean-up project was flagged off by President Mohammadu Buhari following the UNEP report template. Later in the said year, the Project Coordination Office [PCO] was setup and with the appointment of the first Project Coordinator, Dr. Marvin Dekil, work commenced at the PCO in April, 2017.

The PCO claimed "between then and now we have recorded remarkable success" (HYPREP Activities Year Book, 2017, p.7). Though the Project Coordination Office has continued to sue for patience on the part of impacted communities and given the timing and duration of the remediation project as projected in the UNEP report, this study evaluates the successes and challenges of the project in six years of its operations particularly as it affects community engagement. The project must be guided to engage stakeholders in a sustainable manner through training on basic remediation techniques, on various livelihood programmes and moreover through the creation of alternative source of livelihood that could match illegal oil refining that churns out millions for people engaged in it. Something more robust, drastic and pragmatic has to be done to engender a sustainable healthy environmental and ecological balance in Ogoniland and beyond. What if at any point in time a government in power is not disposed to the sustenance of the project? And what becomes of the achievements already recorded when the project is delivered? HYPREP may not stay beyond the project hence stakeholders' engagement is crucial to the sustainability of the gains of environmental remediation in Ogoni.

This study argues that preservation of a healthy environment and ecological balance is everybody's concern. To promote environmental awareness among the people, the need for active and sustainable involvement of the various stakeholders is important to sustainable environmental remediation.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

2.1 Stakeholders Theory

Stakeholder Theory is a view of capitalism that stresses the interconnected relationship between a business and its customers, suppliers, employees, investors, communities and others who have a stake in the organization. The theory argues that a firm should create value for all stakeholders, not just shareholders. R. Edward Freeman is credited with the original details of the Stakeholder theory in organizational management and business ethics that addresses morals and values in managing an organization (Freeman et'al., 2007 and 2010).

According to Kevin Gibson (2012), the term 'stakeholder' came into prominence with the work of Freeman (1984), when he challenged the prevailing view of managerial capitalism by saying that managers bear fiduciary relationship to those who have a stake in or claim on the firm…and though Freeman himself has not made the claim, the idea that the environment can be considered a stakeholder is attributable to a loose interpretation of his original definition of stakeholder as any group of individuals who can significantly affect or be affected by an organisation's activities (Freeman, 1984). Starik (1995, p.216) expanded Freeman's anthropocentric definition of the concept "stakeholder" by including "any naturally occurring entity which affects or is affected by organizational performance".

Stakeholder theorists support sustainable environment by relying on various foundational moral approaches. Phillips (1997), for example, bases his analysis on the notions of fairness and reciprocation. Central to most interpretations of the theory is the idea that stakeholders are interdependent and can forge symbiotic relationships as stakeholder's awareness is essentially, in Senge's (1990) words, "otherwise directed". Thus, a firm ought to recognize the local community by virtue of the benefits it has received from its host. Gibson (2012) took a far expansive view of community when he argues: "…tax breaks given to a company by a town [only] imply some obligation on the part of the firm. However, when it comes to environmental issues, I see no reason to consider any particular action as local, since all actions are likely to have some effect on total welfare". Gibson (2012) gives an instance where in the case of the Smog in Mexico, "the effects were probably far-reaching [so that] even if they are small they may be cumulative". One may agree with Gibson that the plant manager's decisions are partially responsible for climate change or other effects on people in distant land. It has been stressed that when it comes to planetary sustainability, the whole global population is likely to be affected by business decisions, and therefore ought to be considered under a stakeholder approach (Gibson, 2012).

2.2 Hydrocarbon Pollution Remediation Project (HYPREP)

HYPREP was established as a project under the Federal Ministry of Environment to achieve the under listed objectives in Ogoni and other impacted communities;

i) Determine the scope, means and modalities of remediation of soil and ground water contamination in the impacted communities as may be recommended by HYPREP Governing Council (GC) and remedy them

ii) Enhance local capacity for better environmental management and promote awareness of sound environmental management as well as ensure livelihoods and sustainable development
iii) Ensure security and promote peace building efforts in impacted communities, and
iv) Strengthen governance, transparency and accountability in the region.
HYPREP has three organs namely the Project Coordination Office (PCO), Governing Council (GC) and Board of Trustee (BoT).

2.3 Environmental Remediation

Environmental remediation is the removal of pollution or contaminants from water or soil. These waste products/toxic substances are removed for the protection of human health, as well as to restore the environment. Cleaning up the environment is an important focus of the green economy. Sites that are polluted because of industrial activity, the use of pesticides and fertilizer, or the release of other pollutants must be cleaned up in order to redevelop them or return them to their natural state (http://www.bls.gov/green/environmental_remediation/remediation. htm, Accessed 28/06/22).

Environmental remediation is carried out on various environmental media, including soil, sediment, groundwater, and surface water, whereas soil remediation includes topsoil, subsoil, and sediment. Soil and water remediation may be conducted separately or together, depending on the type and extent of the pollution (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Environmental remediation, Accessed 28/06/22)

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Sustainable Remediation Practice

Sustainable remediation practice is important in the ongoing effort by the Federal Government of Nigeria to clean-up oil polluted sites in Ogoni and other parts of the Niger Delta region. This bothers on activities which ensure that remediated sites are not re-polluted by unfriendly environmental practice. One of such unfriendly practices pointed out by a former HYPREP Project Coordinator, Prof. Phillip Shekwolo is oil bunkering. Shekwolo (2021) stated that the effort of HYPREP at remediating Ogoniland will amount to nothing if the sites that have been cleaned are re-polluted by the activities of the youths who engage in illegal bunkering and refining as all the resources invested in the clean-up would have been wasted. He maintained that "UNEP was very objective in recommending the remedial actions and also the preventive actions, because if you do not prevent what happened before, it will happen again".

Sensitization to secure community buy-in had since been a tool by the HYPREP Project Coordination Office from inception. One way this was achieved was through community town hall meetings in the area. Some issues raised by Chief Peter Medee (Member, HYPREP Board of Trustee at the time) in one of the town hall meetings which could hamper sustainable remediation practice are violence, pipeline vandalism, oil theft, illegal refining among other activities that may cause re-pollution.

The call on host communities to protect their environment against re-pollution continues as another seminar held at Tai Council Secretariat Saakpenwa in August 2022 again dissuaded Ogoni youths from illegal oil bunkering and re-pollution of remediated sites. The event witnessed presentation of certificates to over 800 workers trained in Basic Remediation

Techniques and HSE. Capacity development and basic remediation technique workshops organized by HYPREP are geared toward sustaining the gains of soil remediation in the area. Capacity building can be entrenched through the process of institutionalization of training structures, some which should be domiciled in remediation related institutions cited in the area. One important component of the emergency measures recommended in the UNEP report was the establishment of the Integrated Contaminated Soil Management Centre (ICSMC) and the Centre of Excellence in the area. These days not much is heard of these all important establishments. Stakeholders appear to be more concerned about mundane things which come with immediate gains. Instances of host communities expressing appreciation to the President for commencing remediation work in Ogoni and appealing to HYPREP to ensure fairness in the distribution of benefits to impacted communities are commonplace. Emphasis should rather be placed on practices that have post-remediation benefits.

3.2 Sustaining the Gains of HYPREP Remediation in Ogoni

The environmental remediation in Ogoni is time-bound. The UNEP Report 2011 envisaged over thirty (30) years of intense remediation work in Ogoni environment as a condition for the restoration of the environment to its pristine state as it were. Unfortunately, in Nnimmo Bassey's word "…even if you clean up the entire Niger Delta in five years, it will take about three lifetimes to have the environment restored back to normal" (HYPREP November 2021,p.37). More so, other factors exist which may not allow for such a stretch in time notably political exigencies. The preference of a government at every given point in time is more so a stake in the implementation process of the project. What if at any point in time a government in power is not disposed to the sustenance of the project? And what becomes of the achievements already recorded when the project is delivered? HYPREP may not stay beyond the project hence stakeholders' engagement is crucial to the sustainability of the gains of environmental remediation in Ogoni.

For the avoidance of the concerns raised, there is need to commit critical stakeholders in the Ogoni environment to buy-in into the project. Such groups include youth groups and women (HYPREP March 2021, p.15). Community buy-in should be noted can help to forestall re-pollution of remediated area. In an area where some people have made a fortune out of illegal refining of petroleum products needs much more than organizing seminars to discourage them. Such persons are stakeholders in their own right and should be treated as such because they hold a critical stake in whether or not the environment cleaned should remain so or not. Re-pollution is an issue that must be discussed with stakeholders particularly host communities even as the implementation of the twin mandate of HYPREP, remediation of the environment and the restoration of livelihood go simultaneously. The Supervising minister, Chief Mrs. Sharon Ikeazor, muse such community buy-in when she said "plans are underway to engage Ogoni youths in the four (4) LGAs in environmental surveillance; special community security agents for the project" (HYPREP 2021, p.33). Making good of HYPREP assurances that the livelihood programme will continue to provide jobs for women and youths can equally guarantee community buy-in.

There is also need for capacity building training for youths and women from host communities. Some of such trainings done by HYPREP so far include the Shoreline Clean-up Assessment Technique (SCAT) and Mangroves Restoration Training (MRT). Both trainings held in Bori,

Khana LGA trained a negligible number which could make any real impact: "A total of Eight-Six (86) persons…comprising nominees from twenty-five (25) communities in Ogoniland, State members of National Oil Spill Detection and Response Agency (NOSDRA), Rivers State Ministry of Environment (RME), Stakeholders Democracy Network (SDN), Centre for Environment Human Right and Development (CEHRD), Society for Women and Youth Affairs (SWYA), KAGOTE and HYPREP" participated in the exercise (HYPREP December 2021,p.14)

4. CONCLUSION

It has been over six (6) years since the Federal Government of Nigeria flagged off the clean-up exercise in Ogoni. The twin mandates of HYPREP to remediate soil polluted sites and provide livelihood in areas affected are being handled simultaneously. About twenty-one (21) sites have been cleaned according to public record cited and more sites are being remediated in line with the UNEP Report recommendations. The concern that had arisen is how to preserve polluted areas restored from re-pollution. Achieving this goal is not farfetched where government is willing to commit critical stakeholders particularly persons whose activities compromise and threaten the environment generally and remediated sites in particular.

Illegal refiners of petroleum products cannot be dissuaded from engaging in it unless an alternative source of livelihood is created for them. One must applaud government for broaching over the idea of artisanal refining. Notwithstanding, the Federal Government of Nigeria hasn't shown any commitment that she is ready to match words with action. The cost of re-pollution vis-à-vis loss of government revenue by people opposed to artisanal refining is huge; from human health, life expectancy, poor farm yield and food security, impacts on aquatic life, shadowy economies birth by oil bunkering and illegal refining, and consequent security breach are some of the negative impacts of re-pollution.

The HYPREP project must be guided to engage stakeholders in a sustainable manner through training on basic remediation techniques, on various livelihood programmes and moreover through the creation of alternative source of livelihood that should match illegal oil refining that has churned out millions for people who engaged in it. Something more robust, drastic and pragmatic has to be done to dissuade youth from unfriendly environmental practice and safeguard a sustainable environmental and ecological balance in Ogoniland and the Niger Delta region beyond the clean-up exercise.

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