

Newspaper coverage of oil-related environmental rights issues in the Niger Delta

Samuel K. Oredipe¹, Christie J. Omega², Christopher J. Ochonogor³

Department of Linguistics and Communication Studies University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

Corresponding Author: Samuel K. Oredipe

-----ABSTRACT-----

Nigerian newspapers as veritable mass media platforms have over the years contributed immensely to the development of the society. There is however, a general belief that the newspapers have not lived to expectations to draw attention of key stakeholders like government and oil companies to the environmental rights issues in the Niger Delta region. The objective of this study is to look at the coverage provided by the Nigerian newspapers to highlight oil-related environmental rights issues in the Niger Delta. The study was anchored on the agenda setting and social responsibility theories. Content analysis and survey were adopted for this study. The study observed that the people have continued to agitate for their rights to life, rights to a safe environment, protection of the ecosystem, appropriate mitigation and compensation, sustainable development, provision of basic amenities and peace for quality living. The study concluded that Nigerian newspapers have not given adequate coverage to environmental rights issues facing the people. It also clearly noted that the newspapers have a great role to play in the on-going advocacy campaign to ensure a friendly and safe environment as well as bring succor to millions of people in the Niger Delta.

Key words: *Newspaper, Journalism, Environmental rights issues, Development, Niger Delta.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Niger Delta region over the years is faced with the challenges of deprivation, neglect, environmental abuses and lack of infrastructure. And that the people have continued to live in poverty in the midst of their God-given crude oil resources is ironical and of major concern. It amounts to double jeopardy that the people who are denied the blessing from the crude oil have had their means of livelihood destroyed by the same oil activities as the farm lands and rivers are polluted. The Niger Delta which is the third largest mangrove forest in the world is seen as one of the world's most expansive fresh water swamps in Western and Central Africa; and represents the major concentration of biodiversity (Okaba, 2008). The region as one of the largest wetlands in the world covers an area of 70,000 square kilometres. The environment is largely defined by large number of rivers, streams, rivulets, creeks and canals (Nwilo & Badejo, 2005).

According to Azaiki (2003), the true geographic, historic and cartographic definition of the Niger Delta covers three states of Delta, Rivers and Bayelsa because of the similarity in terrain and culture and that all other oil producing states should be categorised together under a different commission. To Ashong and Udouo (2007), there are two classifications for states covered in the Niger Delta, namely: physiographic (core) Niger Delta and oil producing Niger Delta. The core Niger Delta states are: Akwa-Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Ondo and Rivers states. The Niger Delta region as currently defined by the Federal Government comprises Abia, Akwa-Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo and Rivers states. Ekpo (2004) says the inclusion of oil producing states from other geo-political zones is seen as administrative convenience by the government. According to the 2006 population census, there are 31,224,657 million people in the Niger Delta, which ordinarily accounts for more than 22 percent of Nigeria's population (NDR Master Plan, 2007).



Fig. 1: Map of Niger Delta States

S/No	States	Population
1.	Abia	2,833,999
2.	Akwa Ibom	3,920,208
3.	Bayelsa	1,703,358
4.	Cross River	2,888,966
5.	Delta	4,098,391
6.	Edo	3,218,332
7.	Imo	3,934,899
8.	Ondo	3,441,024
9.	Rivers	5,185,400
	Total	31,224,657

Table 1: 2006 Population Figures for Niger Delta States(Ambros, 2018)Source:National Population Commission (NPC, 2006)

Crude oil was first discovered in commercial quantity in 1956, in Oloibiri, an Ijaw town in the present day Bayelsa State. Since then, oil has become the mainstay of the Nigerian economy, accounting for about 98% of her annual earnings. Ogege (2006)affirms that it is not in contention to state that the lands and waters in the region produce the bulk of oil that generates the stupendous wealth for the country. The various oil and gas activities in the region have exposed the oil producing communities to environmental degradation and deprivation. The traditional means of livelihood of the people have been literally changed, and severely destroyed.

The prevailing deprivation and long period of neglect have provoked myriad of crises in the region that are not only tearing the region apart but also causing tension across the country. Corroborating this position, Akinbi (2012) has listed some of the issues that have caused agitations and crises in the region to include: deprivation of the people, burden of devastated ecology, lack of basic amenities and infrastructure, demand for resource control, perceived collusion of government with oil companies and lack of government commitment to the welfare of the people. Ochonogor and Cookey (2016) note that it is a paradox that the area which produces the oil wealth that sustains the nation's economy is characterised by pervasive poverty among the inhabitants. Saro-Wiwa (1992) asks the question 'is it not ironical that the wealth derived from oil by the Federal Government is not reflected in the socio- economic life of the oil- producing communities'?

The agitation by the people of the Niger Delta for economic and environmental justice over the years has been anchored on relevant legislations. Chapter two of the Nigerian 1999 Constitution, Section 20, under Environmental Objectives tends to protect the people of the region. The provision states thus, "the state shall protect and improve the environment and safeguard the water, air and land, forest and wild life of Nigeria".

The history of environmental policy in the Nigerian oil and gas industry dates back to 1914 when the Minerals Ordinance was enacted by the colonial administration. The primary objective of the Ordinance was to prohibit the pollution of water courses in the process of mining and prospecting for any mineral, including

petroleum (Taleb, 2017). The Oil Pipelines Act was first enacted during colonial rule in 1956 and later amended in 1965. The Act contained some broad environmental provisions and more progressive sanctions. There were other legislations including the one to end gas flaring to guarantee a sustainable environment and protect the rights of the people to live in a safe environment.

Omoshue and Asadu (2016) capture the environmental rights issues to include freedom from pollution and environmental degradation, ensure good well-being or sustainable development, access to nature, adequate housing, appropriate and standard health care, protection and preservation of the air, soil, water, flora, fauna and areas to maintain the ecosystem. From history and activities over the years, the environmental rights issues should ordinarily cover right to life, right to adequate food, right to job opportunities, economic, social and cultural rights, right to highest attainable standard of health, and right to information.

The media no doubt are key to the socio-economic development of the Niger Delta and newspaper is one of the strategic platforms being deployed to expose the various environmental rights issues in the oil-rich region. Newspaper is strategically positioned in bridging the information gap, create awareness, shape perceptions and then provoke positive environmental actions to guarantee a sustainable society. Over the years, the Nigerian newspapers have reported issues surrounding oil and gas activities including environmental rights issues as they affect the quality of living of the inhabitants. Those issues covered demand for oil companies to adopt best practices in exploration and production, sensitivity to the environment, control of resources, justice, equity, fairness and freedom in the quest for a sustainable Niger Delta. The newspaper as agent of development is expected to highlight all issues bothering on environmental and developmental problems in the region. A strategic deployment of communication will help the people towards building a consensus on what development should be and then plan actions for change and sustainable development (Okoro & Nnaji, 2012). The newspapers, no doubt have obligations to the society and it is important to find out how well they have so far discharged these duties of highlighting the many developmental and environmental challenges in Niger Delta.

II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Since the late 1950s, environmental issues resulting from oil and gas production in the Niger Delta and the perceived neglect of the people from oil bearing communities have remained a great concern. There is also the perceived slow response of the Federal Government and oil producing companies to calls for rapid infrastructural development of the region. The incessant environmental degradation is manifested in the toxic wastes left behind in the process of oil and gas production. Oil pollution and degradation of the environment appears not to abate and inhabitants are believed to be subjected to attendant health hazards arising from unsafe practices by oil companies. The traditional occupation and means of livelihood - fishing and farming are hampered just as the people are believed to have been exposed to various health risks. This has led to series of agitations by the people demanding that the companies operate with recourse to global best practice and ensure protection of the environment as well as guarantee sustainable development of the host communities.

It is reasoned that newspapers have a great role to play to bring issues of the environmental rights to the fore, particularly for the attention of the government, oil companies and other stakeholders. But with increasing number of newspapers in Nigeria that are expected to highlight the myriads of environmental rights issues, the region has remained underdeveloped after decades of oil exploration and production. The people of the host communities have continued to suffer untold hardships. This is a major concern and it is in the light of the above that this study looked at how well the Nigerian newspapers have covered oil-related environmental rights issues in the Niger Delta.

III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following are research questions which guided the study.

1. What is the prominence given to oil-related environmental rights issues in the Niger Delta region by Nigerian newspapers?
2. What is the depth of the coverage of oil-related environmental rights issues in the Niger Delta by Nigerian newspapers?
3. Do the stories on oil-related environmental rights issues in the Niger Delta covered by the Nigerian newspapers appear slanted?
4. In what ways have the editorial policy of the Nigerian newspapers influenced the coverage of oil-related environmental rights issues in the Niger Delta?

IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on two theories: agenda setting and social responsibility theories.

The Agenda setting theory is a social scientific theory propounded by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1972. The underlying ideology of the theory is that the mass media have the ability to set the public

agenda with focus on the issues and personalities of importance. Since, it is the duty of the media to play up issues considered to deserve some significance, the researcher is keen on finding out how much of the coverage have the newspapers in Nigeria given to oil-related environmental rights issues in the Niger Delta.

The theory is relevant to this study that looks at coverage given to the oil-related environmental rights issues by Nigerian newspapers. Nigerian newspapers have continued to cover issues in the Niger Delta for the past five decades and regrettably such coverage have not changed the old and unfriendly operational practices that have continued to negatively affect quality of lives. This theory challenges journalists and newspapers to give priority and prominence to Niger Delta issues particularly environmental rights issues as this could bring the issues forth for public debate and attention of the policy makers.

The second theory for this study being social responsibility theory is an extension of the libertarian theory propounded by Siebert, Peterson and Schramm (1956). The theory, which is an American initiative in the late 1940s places emphasis on the moral and social responsibility of persons and institutions which operate the mass media. Indeed, the press, recognises that it has a responsibility to the society to carry out its essential functions (Hasan, 2013).

The media have the responsibility to regulate themselves within the frame work of the law and established institutions to be able to carry out their activities. Based on these principles, the media should follow agreed codes of ethics and professional conduct as the society expect high standard of performance from them.

Guided by this theory, Nigerian newspapers should present truthful, accurate, fair and objective reports on environmental rights issues in the Niger Delta. Thus, newspapers should be impartially committed to restoration of order and peace in the Niger Delta. This theory is to provide a framework for this study to ascertain how far Vanguard, The Nation, The Tide and The Nigerian Observer have been able to fulfill these responsibilities to the society in drawing attention of the government to these issues and suggest measures to achieving sustainable development in the Niger Delta.

V. DEVELOPMENT OF NIGER DELTA REGION

The long years of agitation for better deals in the Niger Delta region is not misplaced after all. The region remains a very strategic economic zone to Nigeria because of the huge deposits of oil and gas. These minerals no doubt constitute the country's economic live-wire. The Niger Delta region could rightly be regarded as holding the key to economic prosperity and greater future for Nigeria. Okaba (2008) states that the Niger Delta presents a perfect example of the paradox of excruciating poverty and misery in the midst of stupendous wealth as the natural resources have not had a corresponding impact on the various communities. Geo-Jaja and Azaiki, (2010) indicate that since 1956 when oil was discovered in Oloibiri till present period of oil boom, communities in the Niger Delta have been fraught with social and ecological risks, which have been expressed in the struggle and various forms of violence witnessed in the region over the past years. Apart from the lack of physical infrastructure in the region, the Niger Delta is emasculated through environmental degradation arising from oil and gas pollution. The repressive tendencies against the people to control their resources is anti-development in itself. Regrettably, the people have been unduly exposed to life-threatening ecological hazards and deterioration of health and social fabrics of the people (Geo-Jaja & Azaiki, 2010).

Over the years, steps have been taken by key stakeholders to address the development issues of the region. The advocacy on various environmental rights issues has been on the increase to create more awareness to fast track the development agenda proposed by various interventionist agencies and other development partners (Okaba, 2008). From the Sir. Henry Willink's Commission in 1958, which gave birth to the establishment of the Niger Delta Development Board (NDDDB) in 1960 to the Presidential Task Force set up by former President Shehu Shagari in 1980, the Federal Government gradually realised the special development needs of the region.

In 1992, the Babangida regime in response to growing discontent and restiveness in the oil producing areas set up the Oil Mineral Producing Areas Commission (OMPADEC). Then came the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), inaugurated on December 21, 2000 by former President Olusegun Obasanjo (NDRMP, 2007). The Federal Government took further steps to assure the people of commitment to developing the region by creating Federal Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs and granted amnesty to former militants in the region.

The anticipated development of the region is also linked to political influence of key people from the region in the Nigerian political landscape. Okaba (2008) posits that the eventual emergence of Dr. Goodluck Jonathan from Ijaw ethnic nationality of Bayelsa State as Nigeria's Vice President in 2007 was a major boost to the long term agitation for political power. Dr. Jonathan, later became the President and Commander-in-Chief of the Federal Republic of Nigeria in 2010, and governed till May, 2015. This ascendancy to the highest political office in the country in no mean way fulfilled the greatest of all agitations and demands by the people to correct a lot of alleged imbalances being raised for decades.

VI. NEWSPAPERS AND THE NIGERIAN SOCIETY

Newspaper is one of the most conventional media used to convey local, regional, national and international news to numerous readers across the globe. Newspaper serves the people with the latest happenings around the world through a network of correspondents and news agencies.

The society can hardly survive without a robust media and more so, media like the newspaper will often provide their audience with a supply of information, images, stories and impressions. Okon (2001) notes that the mass media have the responsibility to reflect community affairs, events and activities as well as keep a society abreast of the news made by its own people. The major issues demanding the attention of the Nigerian newspapers are for oil companies to adopt best practices in exploration and production, remain sensitive to the environment, control of resources, justice, equity, fairness and freedom in the quest for a sustainable Niger Delta. Some of these demands have found their ways into various editions of the Nigerian newspapers over the years. There are, however, strong arguments that Niger Delta issues are under reported by Nigerian newspapers. In their study of four national newspapers, *The Guardian*, *Vanguard*, *Daily Sun* and *Thisday*, Okoro and Nnaji (2012), revealed that the four newspapers were believed not to have provided deep insights into their reportage of the pollution in the region and that the newspapers gave poor coverage given to issues surrounding the Niger Delta.

Some Nigerian newspapers over the years appear to have raised the stakes in the coverage of happenings in the Niger Delta region by introducing dedicated pages to issues of environment and development of the region. For instance, the introduction of a 2-page weekly specialised column, **Niger Delta Voice**, by *Vanguard* every Tuesday, and introduction of a 4-page pull-out dedicated to Niger Delta by *The Nation* every Friday, are indicative of the renewed coverage given to the issues in the region. This singular action by the two newspapers was a strong commitment to bringing Niger Delta matters to the front burner for attention. Ashong and Udoudo (2013) strongly believe that the newspapers are capable of creating rapid awareness among the people of the Niger Delta about the various oil-related environmental rights issues. The myriads of developmental issues still confronting the people are a clear reflection that the people have not been able to engage the oil companies and government enough because many still lack information to do so. But the question is how much have the newspaper reports influenced this awareness over the years?

For the environmental rights issues to gain more public attention, the newspapers will need to highlight the challenges of the region and suggest best approach to guarantee rapid development.

VII. METHODOLOGY

Content analysis and survey design were used in the study. Based on the newspapers studied, the population is 2,506, being all issues of *Vanguard*, *The Nation*, *The Tide* and *The Nigerian Observer* published between January 1, 2016 and December 31, 2017. While the other three newspapers publish daily, *The Tide* publishes three times a week on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. The period was considered because of seeming attention to issues of Niger Delta by the Buhari-led administration since its inauguration in 2015. Using Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sample size table, a sample representative of 335 was recommended for the population. A systematic random sampling came up with 46 issues per newspaper each year and 92 issues for two years making 276 issues in all for three newspapers for 2016 and 2017. Because of the inconsistency of *The Tide*, 70 issues representing about three quarter of 92 were reasonably selected in comparison with three other daily newspapers. The exact dates for the *Tide* issues were picked based on ballot covering the two years period. So, for the purpose of this study, the sample size was 346.

The units of analysis

The following formed the units of analysis of the study: straight news stories, feature articles, opinion articles, letters-to-the-editor, editorials, cartoons, photographs, and advertisements.

Content categories

The content categories covered reports on promotion of rights to life and living in a good environment, advocacy on enabling laws and regulations on environmental rights issues, protection of the ecosystem, sustainable development, provision of basic infrastructure and peace efforts.

Presentation of data and analysis

Table 2: Stories on environmental rights issues published in *The Tide*, *The Nigerian Observer*, *The Nation* and *Vanguard* between January 1, 2016 – December, 31, 2017.

Newspapers	Published Stories	Percentage
The Tide	72	22.43
The Nigerian Observer	59	18.38
The Nation	55	17.13

Vanguard	135	42.06
Total	321	100

In Table 2, *The Nation* newspaper had the least number of publication of 55 within the period under study representing 17.13 per cent of total publications by the four newspapers. Between the two state-owned newspapers, *The Tide* had more published stories on environmental rights issues within that period than *The Nigerian Observer*. It is however, interesting to note that Vanguard had more publications on the subject matter. Despite being a national newspaper, it accounted for 42.06 percent of all stories covered by the four newspapers within the period in focus. The appreciable coverage by Vanguard appears not be accidental as the newspaper has shown some form of commitment to the coverage of environmental rights issues. Okoro and Nnaji (2012) recalled that in their study and analysis of *The Guardian*, Vanguard, *Daily Sun* and *Thisday Newspapers*, Vanguard recorded the best coverage of environmental pollution in the Niger Delta.

RQ 1: What is the prominence given to oil-related environmental rights issues in the Niger Delta region by Nigerian newspapers?

Table 3. Placement of stories in the 4 newspaper (January 1, 2016 -December 31, 2017)

Placement of Stories	The Nation	Vanguard	The Nigerian Observer	The Tide	Total
Front page	3 (5.45 %)	16 (11.85 %)	17 (28.81%)	13 (18.06%)	49(15.26%)
Inside page	49 (89.09%)	117 (86.67 %)	40(67.80%)	54 (75%)	260(81%)
Centre spread	2 (3.64 %)	2 (1.48 %)	1(1.69%)	1 (1.39%)	6(1.87%)
Inside back page	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0 %)
Back page	1 (1.82 %)	0 (0 %)	1 (1.69%)	4 (5.55%)	6 (1.87%)
Total	55	135	59	72	321 (100%)

In Table 3, most of the stories on environmental rights issues did not make both the front and back pages of the four newspapers to earn possible prominence. Only 15.26 per cent of the stories made front page. From the content categories, the three environmental rights issues that enjoyed front page mention were: provision of basic amenities/other development programmes, agitations/peace and government intervention. Stories on important issues like the basic rights to life, rights to live in a good environment and protection of the ecosystem missed out greatly on the front pages of the four newspapers. The stories on back page accounted for a meagre 1.87 per cent with the same percentage for stories on the centre spread. In the breakdown and among the four newspaper, *The Nation* newspaper recorded the least stories on the front page. The table clearly showed that most of the stories were used on the inside pages of the four newspapers. Out of the total 321 stories in the four newspapers, 81 per cent made inside pages. This development reduces the impact of the stories because of lack of prominence.

RQ 2: What is the depth of the coverage of oil-related environmental rights issues in the Niger Delta by Nigerian newspapers?

Table 4. Depth of coverage of stories on The Nation, Vanguard, The Nigerian Observer and The Tide Newspapers

Newspapers	Above 1pg	1 Pg	½ Pg	¼ Pg	¾ Pg	2/3 Pg	1/3 Pg	Less than ¼ Pg.	Total
The Nation	4	2	6	2	2	2	8	29	55
Vanguard	5	17	15	14	7	2	16	59	135
The Nigerian Observer	1	9	1	9	2	2	1	34	59
The Tide	0	5	6	9	2	3	1	46	72
Total	10(3.12%)	33(10.28 %)	28(8.72 %)	34(10.6 0%)	13(4.05 %)	9(2.80%)	26(8.10%)	168(52.33 %)	321 (100%)

In Table 4, out of the 321 stories published by the four newspapers within the period, only 3.12 per cent were above one full page and another 10.28 per cent were full page. However, *Vanguard* recorded the highest number of publications that were quarter page, half page, one full page and above one page. Regrettably, *The Tide*, within the period under study had no publication that was above one page. But more than half of total stories, specifically 52.33 per cent occupied less than a quarter page in the four newspapers. The implication is that most of the stories are scanty and lack depth. It is safe to conclude that majority of stories on environmental rights issues in Niger Delta lack depth in coverage.

RQ 3: Do the stories on oil-related environmental rights issues in the Niger Delta covered by the Nigerian newspapers appear slanted?

The data clearly showed that most of the stories across the four newspapers were reports of actions carried out by key stakeholders to address the various environmental rights issues. And these actions include various projects and programmes embarked upon by the stakeholders including government and oil companies. There are some stories that were purely on advocacy while few other stories provided information about current state of happenings around them. Also, a number of stories highlighted the level of distrust and agitation in form of verbal attacks on the government and oil companies. Regrettably, all the four newspapers failed to anchor enough stories to educate the people on the issues. The possible reason why most stories focused on steps being taken to address the challenges and at the same time engaged in advocacy might not be unconnected with change of government. A new government of President Muhammadu Buhari, had assured the people of Niger Delta of the commitment to address the concerns of the region and so, key stakeholders including leaders in the region even joined to sue for peace and end in hostilities. Within this period, the government demonstrated this renewed interest with sustenance of amnesty programme for ex-militants, regular engagement of key stakeholders, commencement of the clean-up of Ogoni land in Rivers state and some physical projects.

The study also looked at the type of stories carried by the four newspapers and it was discovered that, majority of the stories on environmental rights issues were written as straight news and that accounted for over seventy per cent of the total stories. There is no single opinion article carried by *The Nation* within the period. The editorial comment of a newspaper is seen as a strong voice and in this study, only a handful percent of all the stories made the editorial pages. *Vanguard*, however, had the highest number of editorials on the subject matter. Also, feature articles were a scarce item across the newspapers. Clearly, the type of the stories prominently featured straight news to the detriment of articles that should give more perspectives to the ongoing debates.

VIII. DATA AND RESPONSES FROM INTERVIEWS

An interview guide was used to extract responses from the editors of the four newspapers under focus. Specifically, the survey was to provide answer to research question four which seeks to find out the ways the editorial policy of the Nigerian newspapers influenced the coverage of oil-related environmental rights issues in the Niger Delta.

Those interviews to achieve this objective were the editors of *Vanguard* (Mr. Adekunle Adekoya), *The Nation* (Mr. Adeniyi Adeshina), *The Tide* (Mr. Ibim Amieyeofori) and *The Nigerian Observer* (Mr. Eubaldus Enahoro). The editors of the two state-owned newspapers, *The Tide* and *The Nigerian Observer* posited that the policy was primarily to protect the rights of the Niger Delta people and build harmonious relationship between the government and the companies operating in the area. Mr. Amieyeofori said, “we always seek to protect and defend the environmental rights of the people and this is done consciously to create harmonious relationship among the people of host communities, oil companies, and the government of Niger Delta states. Our policy is conscious of promotion of environmental rights issues and call for the development of oil bearing communities”.

For the editors of *The Nation* and *Vanguard*, they insisted that their newspapers remained national media in content with no bias coverage of a particular region but to highlight developmental issues in all corners of Nigeria. According to Mr. Adeshina, the editorial policy is to promote freedom from oppression and every actions impeding development. “As a newspaper, our editorial policy is in line with our motto: “Truth in defence of freedom”. That is our philosophy and that is why we highlight the issues of Niger Delta. Our editorial policy is to highlight all of the issues affecting the people so they can attract attention of government. It is certainly not peculiar to the Niger Delta. We are concerned about people who are disadvantaged. We are the voice of the voiceless across the country. We have done this through pictorials, features, news and special projects”.

The editor of *Vanguard*, Mr. Adekunle Adekoya, said the editorial policy of the newspaper is focused on the coverage of events of national interest and that *Vanguard* is not a regional paper. According to Mr. Adekoya, “our motto: towards a better life for the people”, indicate we are a national newspaper. The Niger Delta happens to be one of our major catchment areas. We enjoy very high patronage from the region and it

might not be an accident if we devote more space concerning issues in Niger Delta as we do to all part of Nigeria. There are also dedicated pages to the Southwest and Northern part of the country. We continue to ventilate all the issues of development and we try very hard to ensure that it is national. So, we put all of these in the public domain to generate debates. We have done several reports over the years and not just for the Niger Delta but for all part of Nigeria. But we are conscious of the special needs of the Niger Delta because of the oil activities there”.

In the final analysis from the interview, the editors clearly defended the editorial policies of their newspapers. Expectedly, the two state-owned newspapers, *The Tide* and *The Nigerian Observer*, operated like regional newspapers whose editorial policies tilted towards highlighting Niger Delta issues. But this is not the case for the two national dailies, *The Nation* and *Vanguard*, where the editors insisted that the editorial policies were designed to bring to public attention, developmental issues confronting every part of the country.

IX. CONCLUSION

The study has revealed how much coverage the Nigerian newspapers have given to oil-related environmental rights issues in the Niger Delta. It has been clearly established that the newspaper is a critical medium to create awareness and close the information gap towards meeting the development aspirations of the people of the region. The analysis of the study revealed that the four newspapers did not give adequate and in-depth coverage to the environmental rights issues confronting Niger Delta. The poor coverage given to the issues should be of serious concerns to key stakeholders. The four newspapers failed to set any serious agenda agitating the minds of the people and they abdicated their social responsibility to the people who expected so much from them.

The Niger Delta no doubt needs the support of the newspapers for an end to many environmental issues and underdevelopment. It is in fact ironical that a region with so much wealth will continue to wallow in poverty. The long list of the environmental rights issues have remained unattended to. Surely, the agitation is being sustained by the people in order to build a better future for the younger generation. The Nigerian newspapers must join in this advocacy to create more awareness of these issues among the people with a view to bringing the suffering to public attention for immediate government intervention. The newspapers must go beyond just writing straight news in few paragraphs to writing insightful articles that will enjoy more space. In fact, the editorial policies of the Nigerian newspapers should favour the region because Niger Delta truly deserve special focus and coverage and this must be consciously done as part of their social responsibilities. The newspaper should provide that interface between the people and all relevant stakeholders who are in prime position to influence development action and programmes in the region.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The followings are the recommendations from this study:

1. Environmental education should be included in the school curriculum from primary to tertiary institutions to inculcate in the people environmental friendly attitudes.
2. The federal government should ensure oil and gas companies operate in line with existing laws and regulations as well as to international standards. The companies must be made to invest in the host communities and the people through well-articulated programmes.
3. The government alongside its special intervention agencies should invest reasonable percentage of revenue from the oil and gas production in various communities to give the people a sense of belonging and fulfilment.
4. As a matter of social responsibility, newspapers in Nigeria should adopt a friendly editorial policy to highlight the environmental and developmental challenges facing the Niger Delta as a result of oil and gas activities.

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