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The rationale for conducting environmental impact assessment is to enable stake-holders, particularly decision-makers, to consider cost-benefit analysis of locating a project in an area. Since development is a must and environmental protection is equally a necessity, how do we maintain the balance?

This is at the crux of a training for community leaders by an in Warri, recently.

The soil is despoiled evidently. Even grasses that grow wildly elsewhere are inhibited from flourishing. In that situation, crops too, cannot grow as the soil has lost its fertility almost completely. The grasses that managed to sprout forth appear burnt that even animals could not feed on them. This is the state of a farm land close to an oil facility in Iwhrekan community in Ugheli South Local Government Area of Delta State. The environment in the community has become endangered because of gas flares and oil spills that have been occurring over a long period of time.

The impact of environmental pollution have reduced some communities in Nigeria to penury. The negative impacts of extractive companies and industrialisation itself, have become unbearable for host communities so much that some have rebelled against the so-called development. The Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), has become a global requirement given that the community is ultimately consistently negatively affected by industrialization and the attendant deterioration of the living environment.

It is against this background that the Environmental Rights Action/Friends of the Earth Nigeria (ERA/FoEN), working in concert with Oxfam GB with support from the British High Commission, organised a two-day training on EIA for some select community leaders in the Niger Delta

in Warri last week. The choice of the oil city was informed by the fact that it is the heart of the Niger Delta

where most environmental degradation due to the oil drilling activities occur.

Speaking on the training overview, Mr. Akinbode Oluwafemi, programme manager, ERA/FoEN said it was important for the host communities to be aware of their basic environmental rights for them to engage policy makers constructively. Oluwafemi noted that as an environment-friendly organisation, they believe that EIA process was a veritable tool for achieving sustainable development and environmental governance.

Also speaking on the overview, Mr. Osaro Odemwingie, programme officer, media and communications, Oxfam, stated that his organisation's support for the process was as a result of the contextual assessment conducted by it at the time it set up office in Nigeria in 2001. He said the analysis revealed that there was high incident of poverty in the Niger Delta

as well as other parts of

Nigeria

“The analysis also revealed that the poverty incidence is not as a result of sheer laziness on the part of the inhabitants of the region, but as a result of the disruption of their livelihood occupation such as farming and fishing due to environmental degradation occasioned by accidents from oil prospecting activities”, he stated.

Speaking on the topic: “Environmental Impacts and the Vulnerability of Communities”, Mr. Nnimmo Bassey, executive director, ERA/FoEN, described the Niger Delta

as “exploited, misused, abused, polluted, underdeveloped, and almost completely dead; like a cherry fruit sucked and discarded”.

Bassey noted that the majority of Nigeria's oil reserves are found in the region. “The oil industry is violent by nature and their mode of operation is intrinsically hostile to the environment and the people who live on it. The massive impacts on land, water, air and socio-economic/cultural structures can only be mitigated by careful and conscious actions by both operators and regulators of the industry. The critical need for a strict EIA regime is further anchored on the understanding and on the fact that the law of the land makes it mandatory for major activities in our environment to be preceded by Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) as well as Socio-economic impact assessments”, he added.

He said the oil majors continue their assault, which is largely unchecked and is reinforced by continuing oil spills, lax environmental regulations, and government complicity. He stressed that marine as well as air pollution from gas flaring remain acute problems.

According to him, the EIA is a necessary strategic environmental assessment needed to evaluate potential and actual impacts of policies, programmes and plans with the purpose of mapping out directions and preparing plans for the mitigation of adverse results and/or totally abandoning proposed paths of action. “The EIA is ideally carried out at all stages of project formulation and implementation. An environmental impact is any form of direct or indirect alteration to the environment wholly or partially consequent upon an activity being carried out in the environment. It predicts, identifies and evaluates expected and unexpected environmental impacts”, Bassey submitted.

He said disasters occur where hazards and vulnerability meet. Explaining further, he said disasters are triggered by hazards and these are prominent in oil related operations.

“The consequence of reckless resource extraction is also the tragedy of the Niger Delta. It is emblematic of an area that suffers a dearth of social amenities, high unemployment, environmental degradation, and other social malaise. The

Niger Delta

is a very vulnerable region and this vulnerability is both created and deepened by poverty and the poorest in the society has the least resources to cope, resist and recover from environmental challenges. The impacts can be seen at individual, family and community/regional levels”, Bassey noted.

According to him, EIAs, where conducted in Nigeria, are often done reluctantly or perfunctorily. He said the idea appears to be that the EIA is merely a requirement-meeting-device. “With that frame of mind, project proponents produce so-called EIA documents as part of project requirements without opening such documents for public scrutiny as required by the law”, he added.

Bassey stated that the critical issues that EIAs would help address include: access to safe water

and sanitation. Others are good air quality and control of toxic chemicals the industry generates.

“One of the least considered causes of poverty, insecurity and destruction is climate change. As the world's temperature rises as a result of the release of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, we experience sea-level rise, floods, loss of natural resources and freak weather events. In the northern part of Nigeria there is an increased threat of desertification. All these have direct implications on our food supply systems, water scarcity and health. Thus climate change makes access to food sources unpredictable and increases poverty and disease. Women bear the brunt of all these and resulting conflicts affect them disproportionately”, Bassey submitted.

He noted that EIA opens opportunities for community control of community resources. “It is common wisdom that ownership engenders protection. Community-based resource management methods would lead to sustainable usage of these resources. Issues of deforestation accelerated by oil prospecting and exploitation would be minimised”, he added.

According to Bassey, the Niger Delta environment can best be protected if we begin now to make definite plans for a post-petroleum Nigeria. He suggested that there should be the creation of an environment/people survival fund for use in ameliorating the challenges the oil industry is presently accumulating.

He lamented that the major concern of the central government is the accumulation of foreign exchange and sometimes the increase of foreign reserves, adding, “In this mindset, the centre holds the cash while the grassroots contend with the risks. This situation cannot be changed in such a way that risks and are shared and impacts are mitigated unless communities organize and dramatically insist on an end to business as usual”.

He advocated the setting up of the Community Crisis Committees with deliberate capacity building efforts to ensure a fair deal. He said the committees can participate and ensure that environmental impact assessment are conducted, reviewed and accepted before any major activity is allowed. “EIAs are conducted and reviewed at the levels accessible to the public and where documents are made available in vernacular and other accessible languages in order to stop impunity and continued exposure of our communities to avoidable hazards”, Bassey stated.

In his various presentations, Mr. Nurudeen Ogbara, consultant to ERA/FoEN and notary public, who was the chief trainer, noted that the need to maintain a balance between development and environmental hazards, has given birth to the mechanism of EIA. Consequently, Ogbara stated that the result of EIA as a mechanism would ordinarily engender the development of an environmental management Plan that would ensure impact monitoring and mitigation, if not remediation, as the case may be, at appropriate time and by relevant governmental and other agencies, particularly where a decision is taken to go ahead with the project regardless of the outcome of EIA.

He described EIA is a process and procedure involving a rapid assessment technique for determining the existing condition or status of the environment and identifying impact of activities on environmental parameters.

“The EIA usually leads to, or contain, recommendations on regulatory measures, including for instance the application of international standards that can be employed and the roles of concerned agencies will be defined to achieve efficient environmental management and to meet the requirement of Article 24 of the African Charter on Human and People's Rights (Ratification

& Enforcement Act, Cap 10, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria, 1990) which states that All people shall have the right to a generally satisfactory environment favourable to their development", he stressed.

Ogbara submitted that the EIA Law in Nigeria was a useful tool in ensuring environmental safety & security. "However, there is a glaring shortcoming in some areas such as community participation, transparency, publicity, structural and managerial frameworks which require serious consideration if the overall objective of Rio Principle 17 is to be effectively realised", he stated.

He advocated a people-oriented EIA that would safeguard the environment without losing focus of the desired development. Testimonies by some community participants revealed that corporations in Nigeria are still a far cry from the normal internationally accepted methodology of EIAs.