

## **Oil Exploration in Eastern Obolo Environment, 1996 – 2021**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Eastern Obolo is richly endowed with abundant natural resources especially crude oil and gas. Oil exploration has impacted disastrously on the people and their environment. Despite its immense contribution to the up-keep of the state, the area has suffered monumental neglect and deprivation in addition to the destruction of the ecosystem. The fauna and flora are under threat. The exploration of crude oil apart from causing damages to the ecosystem has been one of the major sources of communal conflicts and crime in the area. This vexed situation has in recent years encouraged youth restiveness, violent protests, pipeline vandalisation and kidnapping. Against this backdrop, the paper argues that unless there is a paradigm shift in the manner the oil multinationals as well as the state and federal government respond to these ugly situations, violent crisis will continue to prevail.*

**KEYWORDS:** Eastern Obolo, environment, littoral multinationals, oil exploration, Exxon-Mobil, Agip, pipeline, Niger Delta

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Eastern Obolo are Obolo speaking people east of the Imo River in the Niger Delta region of Southern Nigeria. The area is presently in Akwa Ibom State and administered by the government of Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria; and covers from Imo River estuary on the west to Kwa Iboe River on the east. It is not certain exactly when Obolo people settled in their present abode. Their settlement is as old as history. The entire area is crisscrossed by network of rivers and creeks. From the riverine terrain and bordering on the Atlantic Ocean, artisanal fishing provided the bedrock of economic activities from time immemorial to the present.

Oil exploration and exploitation in the area dates back to the 1950s. According to Enemugwem (2009:137) oil was discovered in Eastern Obolo in 1957, almost the same time with Oloibiri; by the Shell D' Archy Petroleum Development Company. Ikein (1990:60) mentioned Andoni among the major crude oil producing areas in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Though Eastern Obolo was not mentioned but this applied to Okoroete in present Eastern Obolo. In Obolo (Andoni), Okoroete was the first place crude oil was found. The discovery of crude oil in the area by SPDC attracted multinational corporations to the area especially after the

Nigerian civic war. The activities of the oil companies in the area have impacted on the socio-economic life of the people and their environment.

Therefore, this paper focuses on the birth of Eastern Obolo as a local government area, brief history of crude oil exploration and the effects of the oil exploration on the people as well as their environment.

### **The Birth of Eastern Obolo Local Government Area**

Eastern Obolo is a segment of the Obolo speaking people now in Akwa Ibom State. The name “Eastern Obolo” was coined by the colonial administration of the Eastern Region of Nigeria in about 1931. It was an administrative language to distinguish the area as a result of the colonial administration’s reorganisation of the Obolo speaking people in the Eastern Region of Nigeria for administrative purpose(s). The Obolo speaking people were grouped into three clans, namely; Ngo (headquarters at Ngo), Unyeada (Unyeada as headquarters) and Eastern Obolo (Okoroete as headquarters). The reorganisation as should be noted did not only apply to the Obolo but also to other minority ethnic groups in the region. The Obolo and the Ibibio of the present day Ikot Abasi were in Obolo Division under the Calabar Province with headquarters at Calabar. The arrangement remained till 1967.

Following the collapse of the first republic in 1966 and the creation of states in May 1967, the Obolo still remained in Obolo Division with the new state – South Eastern, with its capital at Calabar. The name “Eastern Obolo” was reaffirmed twice by the South Eastern State Government Edicts No. 6 of 1970 and 7 of 1972 respectively (Ukpatu, 2021:3). Further, creation of states in 1976 led to the balkanisation of Obolo people in that same year with Eastern Obolo left in Cross River State later Akwa Ibom State; while the other two clans of Ngo and Unyeada merged with Rivers State and were in Bonny Local Government Area of Rivers State.

Eastern Obolo villages were in Obolo division now Ikot Abasi till 1996. It would be recalled that in 1980, the Obolo people presented a position paper at the Asiwaju Boundary Commission, demanding for the merger of Obolo people but was advised to seek the creation of a development area or local government (Ejituwu, 2005). From 1980 onward, every request for merger of Eastern Obolo with Western Andoni usually contained demand for local government. It is therefore not surprising that in January 1996, the people of Eastern Obolo submitted their position paper demanding the creation of Eastern Obolo as a local government area at the Arthur Mbanefo State Creation Panel at Uyo.

On December 4, 1996, Eastern Obolo Local Government Area was among other L.G.As created by General Sani Abacha, Head of State and Commander- in-Chief of the Nigerian Armed Forces. Eastern Obolo Local Government Area is culturally homogenous with a common cultural heritage/language – Obolo. The L.G.A (Eastern Obolo) presently has two clans, namely: Okoroete and Iko; with a population of 89,574 as of 2006 population census. (Akwa Ibom Demographic Dividend Profile, 2018:3). Eastern Obolo is one of the littoral local government areas in Akwa Ibom State with Imo River on the West, Ikot Abasi L.GA – North,

West and Atlantic Ocean on the South. Eastern Obolo is a major crude oil/gas producing LGA in Akwa Ibom State.

### **History of Oil Exploration in Eastern Obolo.**

Oil exploration and exploitation in Eastern Obolo predated the creation of the area as a local government as well as Akwa Ibom, as a state in September, 1987. Commenting on the history of crude oil exploration in Nigeria, Omorogbe (2003:16-17) says that effective oil exploration activities began in 1938 when the colonial government granted concession to Shell D' Archy Petroleum Development Company. Though the colonial government later reviewed the concession in 1959 to accommodate other oil companies. The concession of 1938 and the review in 1959 stimulated oil exploration, exploitation and production in Nigeria, Eastern Obolo inclusive. The exploration of crude oil in Eastern Obolo was pioneered by SPDC in 1957. The company between 1957 and 1966 drilled many oil wells and cork them in Okoroete, Okoroinyong, Emeroke and Iko. The oil exploration in the area was halted by the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War -1967-1970, and was resumed in 1972.

Between 1972 and 1980, an oil flow station was established at Iko in Eastern Obolo- Utapat flow station. Today, the area plays host to the following Oil Companies; Exxon Mobil, Gulf (now Chevron), Agip, Safra (EIF) and SEEPCO in addition to SPDC. The platforms which are both onshore /offshore of these companies are located in the area.

It is pertinent to note that before the creation of Akwa Ibom State, Eastern Obolo was the only onshore producing community in the South Eastern State, later Cross River and now Akwa State. In 1980, Eastern Obolo yielded about ₦230,479,000 annually from her twelve oil wells – that is 26000 barrels daily (Mbikan1990:20). Every other crude oil well in the state was offshore and belongs to the federal government of Nigeria until about 2005 when the onshore / offshore dichotomy was resolved through the Supreme Court ruling. Eastern Obolo, Mbo and Ibeno LGAs have placed Akwa Ibom State as the leading crude oil producing state in Nigeria.

### **Effects of the Oil Exploration on Eastern Obolo Local Government Area**

The bulk of crude oil in Akwa Ibom State is located in Eastern Obolo LGA. Petroleum oil is currently one of the most lucrative sources of wealth and energy in the state. It has created an impressive economic growth, while Eastern Obolo is faced with ecological problems. Today, Akwa Ibom State is rated as the highest crude oil producing state in Nigeria. Other crude oil producing local government areas in the state are Ibeno and Mbo. The adverse effects are noticeable in the following areas:

#### **The Ecosystem**

Oil exploration in Eastern Obolo has led to the destruction of the ecosystem. The continuous exploration and exploitation of crude oil in Eastern Obolo like other parts of the Niger Delta has not only altered the peoples' livelihoods but continuously disrupts the natural balance of the earth crust in the area. Udofia (2001:3-5), Okonta and Douglas (2003:92-94) as well as Enemugwem (2009:139) identify four processes of extracting crude oil and gas from land and water; While Onuoh (2008:1031-1032) mentioned only three processes. The processes are

preparing the drilling site, exploration of drilling, production testing and transport. All the above listed processes have adverse effects on the ecosystem of the area. The first stage is the clearing of all vegetation along the route which seismic cables are laid to connect the positive and negative points, and massive explosions that occur which shakes the whole area for kilometers in radius due to the dynamite used for the exploration (Okonta and Douglas, 2003:249). The explosion / vibrations from the shooting of the dynamite, usually create crevices / cracks on the earth surface as well as buildings in the area. This action kill birds, other animals and fishes (that live in the creeks/rivers) and sometimes collapse buildings. Signals from the shooting are recorded. The second stage has to do with dredging the waterways / channels in Eastern Obolo to allow drilling rigs / tug boats / house boats access to the drilling sites. The dredging usually result in serious environmental degradation. For instance, in the process of dredging, dredged materials usually are not properly disposed of. Sometimes the dredged materials / waste are either dumped on either side of the rivers / creeks after which they are washed back into the rivers / canals thus increasing sedimentation in the creeks. The drilling rigs with drilling operations coupled with land clearing in addition to noise from the drilling operations accelerate the destruction of some animals and fish species and constitutes noise pollution which is not good for the environment.

The third stage is the production testing, carried out with the used of pipelines to send crude gas to the nearest flow station. In the process of laying more pipes, more damages are done to the environment and sometimes production water over flow from the pits also causing more damages to the people and their environment. Finally, the massive movement of drilling equipment, heavy duty vehicles and helicopters especially at night constitute noise pollution. Again moving the tug boats, house boats, drilling rigs through the water ways damages fishing gears of the local fishermen and sometimes loss of lives. Between 2018 and 2021 more road crashes have been recorded in Eastern Obolo as SEEPCO moves their equipment through the narrow road from Ikot Akpaden to their location in Okoroete.

### **Oil Spillage / Gas Flaring**

The problem of oil spillage is another major devastating effect on the environment, associated with oil industry in the Niger delta (Onuoh 2008:132). Eastern Obolo is an oil producing area in the Niger Delta and is not exempted from the effects of oil spills. Frequent oil spills have been attributed to rusty and obsolete pipes used by the oil companies operating in the area. SPDC has denied claims of rusty pipes but claimed sabotage from the local people. However, though sabotage may not be ruled out, research shows that after fifty years of operations, oil pipelines have not been replaced. These pipes got ruptured easily and spill the contents on the environment. The oil spills which has becomes a recurrent decimal in the area has adversely affected the lives of the people, as well as the flora and fauna. In addition, oil spills also pose serious health risks to the people, as they consume sea foods contaminated by oil spilled (Onuoha 2007). The local fishermen have attested to this. They complained that fishes caught in their waters have petroleum and chemical tastes. Enemugwem (2005:5-7) says that Eastern Obolo witnessed the worse oil spills in January 1998 and November 2000; Mbo and Ibeno still in Akwa Ibom State were also affected. Between 1970 and 1987, about 360 cases of oil spillage were reported in the Niger Delta Region which includes Obolo. At some points this issues have

become almost a yearly affair; affecting aquatic lives and the vegetation (mangrove) in the area. Furthermore, before the stoppage of gas flaring in about 2007 in the area, continuous gas flaring from the Utapate flow station has affected houses in many villages in Eastern Obolo. Some of the affected villages are Iko, Okorombokho, Okoroiti, Okoroete, Elile, Amadaka and Kampa. In addition, harmful acid rains that fall on rivers / creeks surface waters kill fishes, their eggs and fingerlings, thereby depleting fish and other marine population. Many Obolo people depends on rain and river water for drinking. The negative health effect of these on the people can better be imagined.

### **Communal Conflict**

Before, the discovery of crude oil in the area, inter and intra communal conflict was not common. In 1991, Ikot Ekong an Ibibio village in Mkpate Enin LGA, located over eight kilometers from Eastern Obolo brought census enumerators to a village in Okoroete to take head court claiming it to be part of their village. This led to the communal conflict between the two communities. In 1991/1992 another communal violence was between Amazaba villages in Eastern Obolo and Ikot Akpan Udo in Ikot Abasi in April 1989, 1990, and 2008. All these are as a result of the struggle over oil well locations in some of the communities. In 2021, Akwa Ibom State through the state house of assembly passed resolution mandating the state government to remap the state. The remapping exercise saw some villages in Eastern Obolo LGA being exercised and placed in Ikot Abasi, Mpat Enin and Onna. Also Ibeno LGA suffered the same fate. In point of fact, the remapping, made Ikot Abasi, Mpat Enin and Onna LGAS having direct access to the Atlantic Ocean there by giving them right to the littoral as oil producing areas in Akwa Ibom State. The remapping was challenged by Eastern Obolo in a State High court and judgement delivered in favour of Eastern Obolo. Shell has overtly or covertly encouraged communal conflicts in the areas of their operations. Okonta and Douglas (2003:250) quoted the German firm Geko Prakla Schlumberger; a seismic firm to Shell thus.

We used dynamite to kill fish sometimes, sometimes we sell some to make money or simply give them away to our friends in the area where our camps or houseboat are located''

The statement above has clearly demonstrated how Shell and other oil companies have encouraged crisis in their areas of operation including supplying dangerous weapon to them.

### **Crime**

There are increases in social vices as a result of oil exploration / oil companies operations. In Eastern Obolo, Ama-Ogbari (2009:85-86) mentioned some social vices in oil producing communities in the Niger Delta to include; prostitution, touting, robbery, gambling, kidnapping, militancy, hostage taking and illegal bunkering. Others include illegitimate and abandoned children. All these crimes are existing in Eastern Obolo. Of recent is the upsurge in sea piracy. It is pertinent to note that the Gulf of Guinea include Akwa Ibom coastal areas, and is noted for the smuggling of illegal petroleum products. Pirates target smugglers of these illegal petroleum products and oil workers especially expatriates to rob them of both foreign and local currencies. They equally target illegal arm dealers for sophisticated arms and ammunitions for their operations (Israel and Mbikan 2021:59). Because of the presence of the Nigeria Military around the oil platforms in the area, pirates have turned their attention to the

local fishermen. According to local sources in the area, over one hundred outboard engines have been seized by sea pirates between 2015 and 2021. Sources in the area put the figures at one hundred and seventy-three outboard engines. This has crippled fish production activities and reduced fish catch. Pirates compel the fishermen to redeem with cash their out-board engines seized, by them. The amount range from fifty thousand naira (~~₦50,000-₦150,000~~) depending on the size of the outboard engines. Three prominent fishing settlements in the area worse affected are Elekpon Okoroete, and Agansa. According to the fishermen, the Nigerian Navy guarding the oil platforms in the area sometime refuse to help as they (Navy), claimed that they were not sent to protect the fishermen but the oil workers / platforms. Moreso, the formation of community liaison offices in all the villages in the area have bred corruption and mismanagement of funds meant for development.

There are also reports of bribery among community leaders who demand for money before recommending the indigenes for work with the oil companies; and sometimes, it is alleged that they collect certain percentages of wages from those recommended after they have secured the jobs.

Finally, in the word of Ama – Ogbari, the relationships between the oil companies and the communities have some level of mutuality; such that oil companies provide infrastructure and services like construction of roads, jetties, school buildings, employment of indigenes and scholarship. Ditto, Shell and other oil companies in the area equally provide some essential facilities for the comfort of the people. For instance, nearly all the towns and villages in the area have electricity, enjoy scholarships and other acts of corporate social responsibilities.

## **CONCLUSION**

It can be concluded that oil exploration in Eastern Obolo have impacted both positively and negatively on the environment. On the positive side are the jobs created as well as the corporate social responsibility services done for the communities.

However, the continuing oil spills which directly impact the environment seems to erase any positive contributions made by the oil multinationals. Therefore, the government and the oil multinationals should take proactive approaches towards preventing oil spillage. They should not also politicize the clean-up processes where there is oil spillage.

In addition, adequate compensation should be given to those whose means of livelihood are threatened by the activities of the oil multinationals.

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