

Towards a Polycentric Governance Approach in Implementing the UNEP Report on Ogoniland in Nigeria

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Since the late 1950s the Ogoniland has been a site of oil exploration in Nigeria. Two decades of oil spill warranted the UNEP Report that analyzed the devastating influence of oil contamination in the community and recommended measures on how the legacy can be addressed, including the setting up of the Environmental Restoration Authority and an Environmental Restoration Fund for Ogoniland. To implement these recommendations, the central government set up the Hydrocarbon Pollution Restoration Project (HYDREP). However, apart from its weak legal status, the institutional design of the project embodied several weaknesses in addressing the environmental and public health impacts of decades of oil activities. While scholarship highlights that policies to address complex socio-ecological challenges operate in a polycentric environment of multiple levels and nodes of authority, the HYDREP was blind to the existence of multiple spatialities and diverse agencies and stakeholders, as well as the imperative for local participation. This paper highlights how such severe weaknesses affected the implementation of the UNEP Report and calls for a shift towards a polycentric form of governance, emphasizing government-designed decentralization. Although such a governance system will have many centers of decision-making, to an extent independent of each other, there is need for the central government to lead in the implementation. The study concludes by advancing a model of implementation involving the local community, government and oil industry, embodied in spatial and multi-functional units of governance.