An Assessment of Impacts of Rivers Niger and Benue on Rural Communities in Kogi State: A Case Study of Lokoja Local Government; 2012-2018

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Abstract

The influence of rivers on host societies is increasingly becoming of interest to scholars all over the world. Rivers implicitly provide a wide range of socio-economic impact to host societies. The socio-economic impact transcends agriculture, transportation, market economy, hydro power, flooding, tourism, among others, and are indicators of development in such societies. Many communities in Lokoja local government are host to the confluence of rivers, namely Niger and Benue since time immemorial. The proximity of these communities to the rivers ostensibly places them in vantage position to derive some benefits. This paper attempts a political economy analysis of the impact of rivers Niger and Benue on the development of Lokoja local government. Fundamentally, the paper employs both primary and secondary data in advancing the research through interviews, field surveys, newspapers, magazines and literature relevant to this area of study. The paper argues that the impacts of the rivers on Lokoja local government are both beneficial and injurious; while the former is instrumental to wealth creation, the latter affects lives and properties. Most importantly, the paper contends that utilization of benefits and prevention of the injury requires government intervention. The paper recommends that there should be a liaison between and among government institutions, Nongovernmental organizations and stakeholders to harness the full potentials of the confluence of rivers Niger and Benue.

Keywords: Lokoja, Impact, Development, River Niger, River Benue

Introduction

The nexus between society and river systems have for long provoked debate amongst scholars. The growing interest in rivers-society relations is due to the increasing recognition of rivers’ ability to provide a plethora of socioeconomic activities that are necessary for the development of its close societies (Swatuk, 2008). Rivers are supernatural phenomena, with physical, economic and social expressions to human societies. They are a double edge sword; they bring life and death, civilization and devastation, opportunity and risk (Sadoff and Grey, 2002). Rivers, because of their multilateral purposes drive so many things for its close societies; it can be economical, political as well as sociological (Parker and Oates, 2016). Rivers multipurpose roles include drinking water, recreation, transport, food, and tourism and are very important tool in connecting communities, states, and national boundaries. However, if rivers are not managed, they are likely to become centers of diseases like malaria, cholera, dysentery including flooding which affect life and
property. Like other natural resources, rivers are very useful if they are used sensibly, and useless or dangerous if they are abused.

Many communities that developed along river banks are mostly rooted to the resources the rivers provide (Sadoff and Grey, 2002). Rivers Niger and Benue are among most important rivers in Africa, Nigeria in particular. The two rivers passed through many states in Nigeria before reaching Kogi, the confluence is at Lokoja. The town was once the administrative capital of Nigeria and currently the capital of Kogi state. Rivers Niger and Benue are major sources of socioeconomic activities for inhabitants across communities, particularly the rivers’ bank of Lokoja and her environs. This paper examines how the two rivers have socioeconomically impacted on the communities along the bank of the rivers in Lokoja Local Government Area in all ramifications.

The Study Area

Lokoja is the capital of Kogi State. The location of the town is on the intersecting point of longitude 7049’N and latitude 60 44’E of Nigerian map (Ogechi, 2011). It is located on the slope of a hill known as Mount Patti which is above 400 metres above sea level, as a result of the altitude of the Mountain Patti; one can view the whole town from it. Lokoja is approximately 165 km from Abuja the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) of Nigeria and lies on the western bank of the River Niger at an altitude of 45-125 meters (Ogechi, 2011). The Local government comprised of Lokoja, Oworo, Abugi, Budon district areas, it composed of 10 political wards, two state constituencies, one of the constituent of Lokoja/Koto federal constituency under Kogi West Senatorial district of Kogi State. It is bounded on the North and East by river Niger and Benue respectively, on the West by mount Patti and on the south by Ajaokuta. Lokoja shares common boundaries with Kabba/Bunu, Ajaokuta, Koton-Karfe, Bassa and Adavi Local Government Areas.

Lokoja experiences rainy and dry seasons. The rainy season lasts from May to September each year, with the highest period or months of rainfall being between August and September. The annual average rainfall ranges from 1000mm to 1500mm, while the mean annual humidity is about 70%. The dry season usually sets in from October to April. Lokoja experiences an average sunshine hour of 6.7 per day. Thus, Lokoja generally experiences hot weather condition and this could prevail all through the year.

Lokoja is believed to have been in existence as early as 1800. Some individuals and/or groups of people from different tribes had been living in the area prior to the coming of the Europeans and early missionaries from the early 19th century. The migration of these various ethnic groups to the area could be attributed to the nearness of the location to the banks of rivers Niger and Benue (Ogechi, 2011). The ethnic groups include Oworo, Nupe, Kakanda, Bassa, Hausa, and Igbirra koto, they settled in different quarters of the town.

Lokoja people engage in farming, fishing and trading. While farming is carried out at the banks of the rivers Niger and Benue, also the rivers are veritable sources of fishing in which the local people utilized as another economic activity; in fact, people come from far and near to purchase fish at Lokoja markets. The major markets in Lokoja are the Yaragi, Kpata and the Lokoja International markets. Finally, the town is host to four tertiary institutions, namely Kogi state polytechnic, Korean Institute of Technology, Salem University, Lokoja and Federal University, Lokoja.
A Map, showing the Lokoja as a host to confluence Rivers Niger and Benue

The Role of Rivers in Human Development

Rivers are one of the attributes of the earth planet and play dominant roles in sustaining lives of both animate and inanimate objects. “All life needs water and the presence of water gives life, within the river itself, within associated wetlands, lakes and riverine vegetation, and within the landscape sustained by the river” (Sadoff and Grey, 2002). Rivers are natural factors, instrumental to ecological system, thus the environment, communities, surrounding the rivers, so also do these systems sustain the rivers by regulating the quantity and quality rivers (WWF-UK, 2017). Because of the essential roles rivers play, human communities have always settled close to rivers to improve their life and economic endeavors. Since one essential benefit of rivers is to provide water, people stay very close to rivers because they need water for many chores such as drinking, food production, farming, cottage industries and host of others. Rivers have contributed to human civilization through which trade, transport and tourism are boosted upon. The relationship between the flow of rivers and the economy has long been recognized; it was alleged that Mungo Park discovered the confluence of rivers Niger and Benue, this cannot be done except for the routes the rivers provided. Sadoff and Grey (2002) argued that virtually all the world’s great cities are found along the banks of rivers and only in the past century that technology allowed permanent human settlement far from water.

Furthermore, rivers have also contributed in defining the political structure of human societies in most part of the cities that settled along banks of rivers. Rivers have shaped the political environment of such communities (Sadoff and Grey, 2002). While early societies close to banks of rivers enjoyed economic opportunities from the rivers, they were faced with how to manage and sustain the progress of the opportunities, however, created an
avenue for political institutions and structures. In addition, riverine areas faced the risk of flood, which affect lives and properties. To avoid the risk of flood, it required the organization of large numbers of people, as well as rules and institutions for water allocation. From these, emerged bureaucracies, hierarchies and innovations which helped strengthen civilizations and cities (Sadoff and Grey, 2002). Several works on Lokoja have argued that the recognition of the area as one of the administrative capital in Nigeria was not unconnected to the proximity of the town to river Niger and Benue. Rivers are thus as closely linked with the economic and political fabric of human society. Rivers are extraordinary and multi-dimensional physical systems, a better management of rivers will provide benefits to the host community on one hand, whereas, on the other hand, if they are unutilized, they can bring damages for close societies (WWF-UK, 2017).

Rivers Niger and Benue in Perspective
The Niger River is the principal river of western Africa, and the third-longest river in Africa, exceeded only by the Nile and the Congo Rivers (Meseko, Obieje, and Karpenko, 2018). The drainage basin of river Niger is about 2,117,700 km² in area, extending to about 4,180 km. The river is divided into the upper Niger, the inland Delta, the middle Niger and the Lower Niger. River Niger flows from the Futa Jalon highlands in Guinea making its way between mountains and hills down to the Atlantic Ocean. River Niger runs in a crescent through Mali, Niger, on the border with Benin and then through Nigeria meeting with the River Benue in Lokoja, Nigeria (Ali, 2012).

The Benue River previously known as Chadda River is the major tributary of Niger River. The river is approximately 1,400 kilometers long and almost entirely navigable during the summer months. It rises in the Adamawa Plateau of northern Cameroon, from where it flows west, through the town of Garoua and Lagdo Reservoir, into Nigeria south of the Mandara Mountains; it processes through Jimeta, Ibi and Makurdi before meeting the Niger at Lokoja At the point of confluence (Wikipedia, 2010).

Before the advent of colonialism, rivers Niger and Benue were used by communities that settled along the banks of the rivers to farm, trade as well as use in domestic chores. During colonialism the route of the rivers aided the export of produce, the major commodity then were groundnut, palm oil, cotton, to mention but a few. In exchange, imported goods such as; cloth materials, salt, kerosene, building materials and carpets where offered at the same locations (Ali 2012). Among the international companies that engaged in this trade include, John Holt Company, African Association Ltd and Niger Company Ltd. The exchange of goods and or services created a market economy for Lokoja, in which people of the Lokoja communities including nearby communities such as Ajaokea, Kotonkarfe, Kabba, Girinya, Ayingba, Okene, Bida, Warri came to transact business in the town (Ali, 2012). The domestic market traded on yams, palm oil, bullocks, fowls, animal skin bags, pepper, cotton, Arabian mare, cloth and mat. The major transportation system on the rivers included canoes and ships. The local people, such as Nupe, Kakanda, Bassa and Igbirra koto, served as pilots and canoe-men. They assisted in paddling people and goods around the communities and towns along the banks of the rivers, and got paid for the exchange of this service. The organizations of trade in both international and domestic markets, and the investment in transportation system facilitated the development of Lokoja and placed the town on an enviable height.
Methodology
This paper adopted a survey research design. The adoption of this research design hinges on the study relying on a survey of options of sampling of respondents from the communities on the impacts of the rivers. Furthermore, both primary and secondary data were used in this study. The primary data include participant observation and interview with the stakeholders and members of the community, ten (10) people were interviewed. The secondary data was generated from existing literatures on socio-economic impacts of rivers on local communities. Additional information was generated from web-based generic search engines, using the snow ball to retrieve significant references. The researcher visited the banks of river in Lokoja, during the visit; the researcher had a firsthand view and information (through interview) on the impact of rivers Niger and Benue on communities along their banks in Lokoja local government.

Discussions of Findings in Relations to the Impact of the Rivers
The findings of the study show that rivers Niger and Benue have great impact on the communities in Lokoja local government. The impact is both positive and negative. The research also found that there is an ongoing Federal Government project, thus, the dredging of lower Niger River and Lokoja river port, still ongoing too. These projects have created menial jobs for youths in the host communities, also an easy spot for selling and buying of petty commodities. In addition, the study also found that more than 50 communities are benefiting from the rivers. Interviews with some locals in the communities have shown the rivers are freshwaters and veritable sources for drinking and other domestic usages. Most of the members of the communities along the plain of the rivers have large hectares of farmland near the rivers, in which the water from the rivers is irrigated to the farmlands to yield crop production such as rice, pepper, maize and so on. This shows that the water quality and flow of the rivers Niger and Benue make irrigation systems possible and support better crop yields. Irrigation systems can support livelihoods, poverty reduction, growth and food security (Parker and Oates, 2016). However, the stream of benefits is largely determined by the management of rivers, because people close to irrigation schemes are at higher risk of diseases. This is in tandem with the finding of the study; the people around the banks of rivers in Lokoja are vulnerable to diseases such as malaria, cholera, and dysentery.

Many people interviewed across the communities on the banks of the rivers agreed that the quality of water in rivers Niger and Benue supports fishery and it has resulted into increased efforts in harvesting fish for subsistence and cash economy. Species of fish include, catfish, tilapia etc. There are several literatures that suggest that edible fish productivity is determined by sufficient river quality, flow and connectivity (Parker and Oates, 2016). Fishing, no doubt, provide crucial income and employment for local communities, which in turn support poverty reduction and food security. A young man interviewed in one of the communities boastfully argued that he survived on fishing business to feed himself and the family, in fact, sponsored his education to a graduate level.

The outcome of the interviews with members of the communities along the river plain have also shown that the rivers are still suitable for transportation of goods and people from and to communities on the banks or near the banks of the rivers. It suffices to argue that the rivers are very important tools for connecting communities. Besides water transport can be more cost-effective compared to other forms, particularly for bulk commodities, and can help
to expand trade across communities (Rasul, 2015; Parker and Oates, 2016). According to a market woman interviewed in one of the communities, she mostly transports her farm goods on the rivers with the help of a boat down to Lokoja market from her village. She shrugged that the roads from her village to Lokoja is not motor able and the cost of road transport is high compared to water transport that enable heavy loads but cheaper transport fares.

The water transportation of goods and people on the routes of the rivers Niger and Benue influenced buying and selling of goods and services on their banks, where people come from far and near partake in the market. For example, the popular Kpata market in Lokoja is a direct benefit of the rivers. The market would not have been possible without the presence and suitable transportation the rivers provide. The market, however, is a source of income and jobs for the people and government. An old trader interviewed at Kpata market, claimed that he has been coming to the market since he was young, that the little money he gets from the market is his means of survival and government agents often comes to his shops to collect tax. Also the study observed that the presence of rivers Niger and Benue have also attracted some political institutions in the state such as National Inland Waterways Authority and Nigerian Navy to particularly Lokoja.

Findings of the paper also show that the rivers served as theatre for socio-cultural activities such as Dankwo fishing festival and Lokoja Boat Regatta. These two socio-cultural activities are organized annually to display the diverse cultures and traditions of Lokoja local government. While the Dankwo fishing festival is an event where fishermen mostly youths compete to catch the largest fish on in the rivers, boat regatta comprised of race among sailors in order to win the best sailor of the year. During the festivals, people come from far and near to watch the event, incidentally, the place becomes a hub for small businesses to thrive thus, attracting windows for ecotourism.

The rivers Niger and Benue caused a lot of devastating diseases especially among the people of the communities along the plain of the rivers. Rivers, not sensibly managed therefore, move waste product around then it can result to prevalence of schistomomiasis, malaria and yellow fever in the communities (Akindele and Adebo 2004). Many people interviewed across the communities attested to the facts that they are vulnerable to malaria, cholera and schistomomiasis infections. To many of them, cholera has caused loss of lives. A woman during the interview in one of the communities stated that she recovered from cholera ailment just recent. Studies have shown that poor quality irrigation can have negative impacts on human health; the negative impacts include diseases which reduce nutritional status, or cancers as a result of poorly controlled pesticide use (Akindele and Adebo 2004; Parker and Oates, 2016).

Communities that settled along the banks of rivers Niger and Benue are in very high risk of experiencing flood disasters, most particular, during the rainy season. Floods are among the most devastating natural disasters in the world, claiming more lives and causing more property damage than any other natural phenomena (Chukwuebuka, 2017). An elder man interviewed in one of the communities said, although minor floods do occur but that type of year 2012 that affected lives and destroyed properties rarely occurred. He argued that the first time he experienced a colossal flood on the banks of the rivers was around 1950’s and since then flood of such type did not occur except in year 2012 and 2017. He further questioned the frequent of such type of flood nowadays.
Conclusion and Recommendation
The paper examined the socioeconomic impact of rivers Niger and Benue on communities in Lokoja Local Government. The paper has shown that the rivers are very unique and instrumental to the existence of virtually all the communities along the banks of the rivers. Like other natural resources, the rivers are both beneficial and injurious. They are beneficial because of their importance in irrigation for crop production, sources of fish farming, and suitable route for transportations among others. These economic values are instrumental to wealth creation such as jobs, poverty reduction and government revenue; nevertheless, the paper concludes that these economic values are not well exploited. Furthermore, the rivers also have negative values, particularly, when unutilized; they are seen as center of diseases and potential flood disaster, communities that settled on the banks of the rivers are prone to cholera and flood, which are detrimental to human welfare.

The paper recommends that stakeholders in Lokoja local government should encourage more socio economic activities on the rivers through engaging people, especially youths, into Agriculture, fishing, and sailing. In addition, social activities such as Lokoja Dankwo festival, Lokoja boat regatta should also be encouraged in intensifying tourism in the Local government. Government, particularly the local administration can collaborate with National Inland Water Ways (NIWA) to utilize and manage the freshwater the rivers provide in order to regulate the prevalence of the diseases.

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