

AN APPRAISAL OF ISSUES IN THE NIGER DELTA

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Abstract

No issue in Nigeria has gained more prominence in the 21st century than the issues emanating from the Niger Delta. Issues springing from the Niger Delta have gained considerable attention from both national and international socio-political and economic actors. Aware of these issues, this paper looks at issues in the Niger Delta with particular reference to the factors responsible for the Niger Delta crisis. The paper discovered that the crisis in the Delta is hinged on environmental degradation, human rights abuses, bad governance, unemployment and other related issues. Consequently, the paper looks at the mechanisms used by successive governments to tackle the issues in the Niger Delta with emphasis placed on the post amnesty programme. The paper concludes that all Nigerians have a stake in the issues confronting the Niger Delta people and the resolution of the issues in the Delta will be for the benefit of the Nigerian state and its people.

Nigeria's Niger Delta is organized politico-administratively into nine of the current thirty six states of the federation. These states are; Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo and Rivers. The Niger Delta is reputed to be the third largest wetland in the world, which sustains a complex biodiversity, otherwise attractive to tourists, explorers-adventurers, traders, businessmen/women, academics and a variety of researchers.

Nigerians see the Niger Delta area as the goose that lays the golden egg. Quite often, crises that have erupted in the Niger Delta have had devastating effects on the Nigerian economy. These devastating effects have always made government, the international community and spirited individuals to marshal out plans that would bring a lasting solution to the crisis in that area. To this end, a barrage of issues has cropped up in respect to the issue of the Niger Delta. It is argued that with millions of barrels of oil harvested per day, and an over 90% income to the Nigerian nation, the Niger Delta Provides economic strength that sustains the country. Yet, Niger Deltans feel infuriated when their environment remains undeveloped, with few or no infrastructure in health, schools, transportation, industries etc.

This paper will therefore look at issues that have bedeviled the Niger Delta area of Nigeria with a view to finding solutions to some of the issues.

Conceptual Clarification

The issue of conceptual clarification has always and will always continue to find expression in any worth while academic discourse. To this end, one major concept will be clarified. The concept is the Niger Delta.

Niger Delta

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The current conflict in the Niger Delta is more complex, a crisis involving local patriots and freedom fighters. It involves mainly the Ijaw of Delta, Bayelsa and Rivers States, and could ordinarily be analyzed from their perspective of criminalization of resistance of internal colonialism. The area is rich in mineral petroleum and gas.

Theoretical Framework Structural Conflict Theory.

Scholars have written extensively on the nature, causes and the impact of conflicts. Depending on the school of thought which they represent, such explanations have tended to place a lot of emphasis on one particular or set of related theories, while diminishing the importance of explanatory relevance of other competing theories. This paper briefly reviews some of these theories in attempts by scholars to capture or provide the frameworks for understanding conflicts especially the causes of conflicts, the conditions under which conflicts occur, and sometimes conditions for their resolution and management.

Ademola (2006:4) identified the following theories of conflict to include; structural conflict theory, realist theory, biological theories, frustration-aggression theory, psycho-cultural conflict theory, human needs and psychological theories etc. This paper will however align itself with the structural conflict theory, as a frame work of analysis.

This theory has two main sub-variants. The first is the radical structural theory represented by the Marxist dialectical school with exponents like Marx and Engels, V.I Lenin etc. The second is liberal Structuralism represented by scholars like Ross Scarborough and John Galtung's works on Structural Violence.

The main argument of the structural conflict theory is that conflict is built into the particular ways societies are structured and organized. The theory looks at social problems like political and economic exclusion, inequalities, injustice, poverty, disease, exploitation etc as sources of conflicts. The emphasis of structural theory is thus on how the competing interests of groups tie conflict directly into the social, economic and political organization of society as well as the nature and strength of social networks within and between community groups.

In other words, when social, political, economic and cultural processes are monopolized by a group, it creates the conditions that make people to adopt adversarial approach to conflict. The structural theory is therefore relevant in explaining the Niger Delta Conflicts. It presents a large numbers of factors that are responsible for the emergence of conflict in the Niger Delta. It identifies economic and social factors, political, and institutional factors such as the structure of the state, discriminatory political institutions, inter-group politics and elite cohesion or fragmentation, security factors, cross border criminality, ethnic factors etc (Adetula 2006: Adeomola 2006).

The Niger Delta Crisis

It is on record that the various Nigerian Government structured after capitalist ideology have ignored the Niger Delta, partly because its geography made it relatively inaccessible.

The long periods of military rule in Nigeria contributed to bad governance and corruption; and burden for the provision of government services fell on oil and gas companies which were ill-equipped to supply water and electricity and also to maintain road networks but were only concerned with exploiting the resources in that area.

The scale of this neglect has been an important factor behind the violence in the Niger Delta which is carried out by social groups or street gangs referred to as “cults” or “militants”. These groups made up of youths from the Niger Delta originated with the intention of offering physical protection and providing its members with an opportunity to meet people with similar ethnic or social identities. Overtime, these groups acquired arms and also began to compete with each other over oil bunkering, and general instability in the region compound energy problems abroad, reducing supply and driving up the cost of oil in global market. All these and more arose as a result of neglect and exploitation.

No doubt, the conflict in the Niger Delta has its roots in increasing protests of the region’s communities against their political, economic and environmental disenfranchisement, (Ginikanwa, 2008). The movement for the survival of the Ogoni people (MOSOP) was the first group to gain international attention for their grievances against the Nigerian government and regional oil companies. MOSOP goals included increased local control over resources and more equitable development. MOSOP also sought the resolution of fishing and farming issues that arose from the environmental effects of oil extraction such as oil spills and land soil degradation.

Academic Scholarship

No wonder, the Niger Delta neglect was the major issue in the South-South legislative retreat on constitutional review in 2008, (Eke 2009). As part of the political solution to the crisis in the Niger Delta, Professor Itse Sagay said that;

- The people of the region must have a say about how the oil blocs behind their farms are allocated,
- Oil companies should give a certain percentage of the resources derived from such ventures to their host communities;
- Nigeria should restore and allocate the 50 percent to the federal government and 30 percent would be put in a revolving fund for all the federating states;
- Federal government should apply part of the oil money channeled into federal reserve to the development of the Niger Delta region;
- There must be a comprehensive programme for environmental care and on introduction of an alternative resource to oil because as a finite product, oil could dry up and cause Nigeria's financial strangulation' and
- There should be concerted effort by governments to restrain the Niger Delta Youths through introduction and promotion of skills acquisition programmes that would enable them secure employment in the oil and gas sector.

As a follow up to Sagay's political solution to the issue of the Niger Delta crisis, President Umaru Yar Adua in August 2009 announced the commencement of amnesty programme saying that "the time is ripe for those who have carried arms against the State to drop them and embrace peace". He also emphasized that "the government would be sincere with the general pardon being floated". The general amnesty extended to all militants in the Niger Delta has thus far led to the laying down of arms and a tentative return to peace has ensued as more than 8,000 militants have disarmed and taken the amnesty offer, notwithstanding the refusal of Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) to accept the amnesty.

It is on record that, the Niger Delta crisis has attracted global concern. It is on this premise that the British Deputy High Commissioner to Nigeria, James Tansley said that "British government has no sinister motive in the Niger Delta, except that the Niger Delta crisis poses security threat that has affected the global oil prices and indeed, the global economy. Accordingly, he reasoned that the economic problem which the Niger Delta crisis poses demanded collective solution.

Factors Responsible for the Niger Delta Crisis

Many factors are responsible for the crisis in the Niger Delta. But for the purpose of this discourse we shall discuss just a few.

Environmental Damage The social and environmental costs of oil production have been very extensive. They include destruction of wild life and biodiversities, loss of fertile soil, pollution of the air and drinking water, degradation of farmland and damage of aquatic ecosystems, all of which have caused serious health problems for the

inhabitants of areas surrounding oil production. As a result, oil companies often evacuate inhabitants from their homelands, further marginalizing them.

The system of oil production in Nigeria is skewed in favour of the multi-nationals and government elite who are the direct recipients of oil production revenue. Hence the United Nations warned in a report that “the degree and rate of degradation are pushing the Delta towards ecological disaster” (Jaad 2007). The environmental degradation in the Niger Delta can be seen to take the following ways;

- a. **Oil Spillage** The indigenes and the environment suffer from oil spillage and lack of coordinated efforts by the oil companies and the federal government to clean up as soon as oil spillage takes place. According to Etim (2003) cited in (Jill, 2006), a spillage from a pipeline by the shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) in the Karama Community of Okordia /Zarama Local Government Area of Bayelsa state in June 2003 caused enormous economic and environmental damage and hardship in the area. The spillage was not properly cleaned and the indigenes were not evacuated by the oil company. Community leaders in the area alleged that SPDC awarded the contract for cleaning the spillage to a company that did not do an effective job, thereby resulting in fires and destruction of the ecosystem.
- b. **Gas Flaring** Gas flaring takes place 24 hours and some have been burning for over 30 years, thereby resulting in the release of hydrogen sulphide (sour gas). According to experts, hydrogen sulphide produces sulfur oxides and when sulfur oxides mix with oxygen and water in the atmosphere, they produce acid rain. Acid rain causes innumerable negative effects on the world, particularly the people and the environment, (Komolafe, 2006).

Lack of Development and Unemployment

The Niger Delta region is underdeveloped in all its ramifications, despite the fact that it is the bread basket of Nigeria. Coser (1998) aptly described the economic dilemma of the region when he stated that “the oil region in Nigeria seems to be stuck in a time warp, with little real change since oil was discovered 45 years ago. Away from the main towns, there is no real development; no roads, no electricity, no running water and no telephone services etc”. This is why the unemployed youths of the region have resorted to militancy in an effort to focus national and international attention to their plight. On the strength of the above Hutchful (1985) argued that “shell and other oil companies have perpetuated regional and class inequalities by creating oil colonies in local areas where oil executives live quite lavishly in comparison to the impoverished conditions of the local communities”.

Bad Governance /Corruption The Niger Delta region is riddled with bad governance and corruption on the part of government officials, both at the state and local government levels. It has been argued that if government officials in the region utilized judiciously their monthly allocations, through the creation of jobs and infrastructural development of the region, the situation would not have been pathetic as it is now.

Academic Scholarship

Disturbed by the wastefulness of some states and local governments especially those in the oil region, the then Minister of state for finance, Usman, (2009:6) asked for greater scrutiny of the activities of governors, particularly those receiving huge sums from derivation each month. In her words;

States have been a source of worry to us, lately. If you look at the way money is shared at the Federal Accounts Allocation Committee (FAAC) meeting, federal government gets about 48 percent, while state and local governments take the remaining 52 percent.. Three to four days after the FAAC meeting, exchange rates jump up, which means they are using them to buy foreign exchange. If you look at the states, the states that get so much, you can hardly see anything to show for it. Make telephone calls to any of the states and ask after the governor and you will be told that he has gone abroad. Not only the governors, even the commissioner for finance.

Human Rights Violations Violations of the human rights of the local populace can be cited as one of the factors responsible for the militancy in the Niger Delta region. Oil companies like Chevron, Shell, Agip, Mobil and other oil Companies have been very unkind to the people of the region. The human rights of the people are constantly violated by security forces, at the behest of the companies. For instance, in attempt to suppress the Isaac Boro rebellion in 1966, Nigerian troops terrorized communities including raping of innocent women. Boro was considered to be a threat to the free exploitation of the petroleum resources in the Niger Delta. Again, on January 11, 1999, Ijaw women who were engaged in a peaceful demonstration against marginalization of their people in Port Harcourt were violently tear-gassed, beaten, stripped and detained by a combined team of policemen and soldiers.

Mechanisms for Resolving the Niger Delta Crisis

The Federal Government of Nigeria has developed several methods in an attempt to tackle the problems associated with the agitations of the Niger Delta. At first the government applied the blatant use of force to handle issues emanating from the Niger Delta. However, it got to a point where the government realized that the use of force was not necessary. In this wise, the government created a Commission of Oil Minerals Producing Area Development Commission (OMPADEC) during the regime of General Ibrahim Babangida, for the development of the Niger Delta area.

Faced with the harsh reality of the ineffectiveness of (OMPADEC) the government of Obasanjo established the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), to bring development to the doorsteps of the people. This commission has however not met the needs of the people of Niger Delta as the commission's board has on several occasions been dissolved as a result of non-performance and corruption. Because of the ineffectiveness and corruption embedded in all the commissions created by government to tackle the issues in the Niger Delta, the crisis in the Niger Delta lingered and the government of President Umaru Yar'Adua announced an amnesty for those causing trouble in the Niger Delta.

The government on June 26, 2009 announced the beginning of amnesty which took effect from 6th August 2009 to October 2009. That same government created the ministry of Niger Delta. The thinking of the government at that time was that the ministry would help correct the infrastructural defect that has continued to worry the people of the Niger Delta.

Post Amnesty

As we know, the issue of amnesty came up because the Nigerian government wanted a peaceful resolution to the Niger Delta crisis. To this end Ekaete (2010) averred that “there are actually four key levels to the amnesty. The first one is the disarmament, which has been done very successfully; the second step is demobilization; the camps have been virtually demobilized. The area we are now in is the area of rehabilitation and orientation of the militants and of course infrastructural development”.

Today, almost all the post amnesty programmes are monitored and evaluated by indigenous (Niger Delta) consultant/experts and some notable agitators with successful history of working with high risk groups and policy makers. These people are aware that one of the major drivers of the Niger Delta crisis is in the discrepancy in oil and gas industry especially in employment, scholarship, inequality and quality of living conditions of host communities, and knowing that any programme without their consideration will lead to a collapse of the programme, have involved the people in the aforementioned areas in the post amnesty programme.

Oil and gas programmes have been factored in the post amnesty programme and beneficiaries have been sent to recognized colleges, skills centres and universities at home and abroad, with recognized accreditation and certification.

Furthermore, training modules are cross cutting and adequate to enable participants operate successful and sustain their businesses. All training centres have at least, national accreditation that gives it authority to award recognized certificates acceptable at all relevant levels for employment.

Though the post amnesty programme has encountered challenges like lack of funds, unemployment and the refusal of Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta MEND to accept the amnesty offer, one can not completely say that the programme has failed. On this premise, President Jonathan noted that in 2008 alone, the nation lost N3 trillion at the peak of the activities of the Niger Delta ex-combatants. He stated that the current high oil production was a testimony of the success of the amnesty programmes (Odunuga, 2011).

It is on record that 4,149 ex-militants trained at Obubra (Cross River State) have been placed in skill acquisition centres and formal education in Nigeria and off shore by the amnesty office. 20, 192 ex-militants have so far undergone the disarmament and demobilization training and being re-integrated into civil society. Another 6, 616 that

Academic Scholarship

have disarmed are undergoing non-violence training in Obubra in the second phase of the Amnesty programme.

Conclusion

The issues that have been raised regarding the Niger Delta crisis are serious issues which every rational thinking being and responsible government would take serious. Issues of environmental degradation orchestrated by oil exploitation in the Niger Delta as well as issues of human rights violation, bad governance/corruption and other related issues are issues that must be looked into so as to keep Nigeria safe.

The Nigerian government has realized the danger that this country faces as regard the Niger Delta crisis and has applied both the stick and carrot approach to nip the crisis in the bud. To this end the amnesty programme has created a relative atmosphere of peace to the relief of the federal government and the people of the Nigerian State.

Though there are issues still confronting the Niger Delta, it is imperative for all citizens to work together so as to see that the marginalization and injustices metted to the people of the Niger Delta are substantial addressed.

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