

ETHNIC CRISIS AND YOUTH RESTIVENESS IN NIGER DELTA AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTIVITY

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Abstract

This study seeks to examine ethnic crisis and youth restiveness in Niger Delta and their implications for agricultural productivity. Having undertaken a vivid description of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, the author thoroughly addressed the origin of the ethnic crisis in the Niger Delta. Certain factors are responsible for or cause the ethnic crisis and youth restiveness in the area under study which include: Selfishness, social-political instability, rapid urbanization, poverty, unemployment, tribal conflicts among others. The implications of these ethnic crisis and youth restiveness on agricultural productivity are evident. Both human, crops and animal lives are destroyed, environmental pollution resulting from pipeline vandalism, and so on, become prevalent. Recommendations include: massive training of the youths in specific vocations, rapid infrastructural development coupled with provision of basic amenities in the Niger Delta, diversification of the country economic base to reduce over dependence on oil, strong support for anti corruption and graft policies and eradication of gas flaring to preserve the ecosystem, among many others.

The Niger Delta region can be located in six states namely: Bayelsa, Cross - River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Anambra and Rivers. The oil and gas deposits in the region are high and account currently for more than 80% of our crude extraction and more than 70% of our revenue to service the entire nations economy (Ireyefoju, 1990).

The words Youth and Restiveness have gained notoriety in usage especially in the Nigerian context as related to matters of agitation by the youths in the Niger Delta region. Youth, according to advanced learner's dictionary is when a person is young, especially the time before a child becomes an adult. Restive on the other hand can be defined as unable to be still, difficult to control especially when one is not satisfied with something (Mezieobi, 1994). Youth restiveness is a despicable act being perpetrated by a significant proportion of youths in our various communities that can no longer be ignored. As the name implies, it is a combination of any action, conduct or act that constitutes unwholesome socially unacceptable and unworth while activities engaged in by the youths in any community. It is a phenomenon which in practice has led to a near breakdown of law and order, low productivity due to disruption of production activities, apparent increase in crime rate etc (Soanes, 2001). This had culminated in the loss of

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lives and properties within the area. The problem has caused a lot of instability in the general activities of Niger Delta area. Many companies especially the oil companies operating were closed down and free movement of goods and people was interrupted during the crisis period which drastically affected the agricultural production. It is therefore expedient to look at some of the areas of friction like the origin, causes and effects of ethnic crisis on agricultural production in the Niger Delta with a view to finding possible solutions to them (Ajokporisi and Ifie, 1999).

Description of the Niger Delta Region

Niger Delta region falls within the swamp forest zone of the country. The major mineral (oil) which account for the wealth of the nation is found predominantly in the Niger Delta area. The region has good farm lands which make the occupants to be farmers; and seas, rivers, lakes, and ocean which make fishing another occupation of the people (Usua, 1989). Due to oil exploration and exploitation, the region is faced with serious environmental-problems such as soil erosion, oil spillage and various pollutions which have made life uncomfortable for the population of people living in the region (Soanes, 2001).

Niger- Delta region is inhabited by various ethnic groups and in a bid for each to strive for survival and recognition, series of ethnic crisis, youth restiveness, rivalries and war have been recorded in the region. Some major ethnic groups in the Niger Delta region are the Ibos, Edos, Urhobos, Ijaws, Itsekiris, Isokos, Yorubas, Efiks, and Ibibios (Ezegbe, 1992).

Niger- Delta region has been neglected by previous governments over the years even though the region is the life wire of the country. It is just of recent that Niger — Delta Development Commission (NDDC) was set up to ameliorate the suffering of the people. We hope this mission will come to pass for the development of the long suffering region.

Origin of the Ethnic Crisis in the Niger Delta (Historical Background)

The issue of the origin of ethnic crisis in the Niger - Delta is so wide that we are going to discuss it in two aspects. Firstly the ethnic crisis in Warri area of the Niger-Delta, how it originated and the crisis in Bayelsa state area of Niger-Delta and how it originated. According to Christopher Dime (1997) Itsekiri is an Ijaw word, which literally means a “playground”. It was a portion of an Island where the Ijaws of Objbe-Ijoh and Gulani performed masquerade dances. Iginue (Ginuwa), the progenitor of the Itsekiri people was a banished Benin prince, son of Oba Olua of Benin. Being very proud and fond of wearing fine clothes, he was nicknamed Iginua the proud. Iginua was haughty and full of political intrigues for this and other reasons, Iginua was hated and rejected by the Benin Chiefs and people. Oba Olua then made arrangement with some Ijaw men to take Iginua away (Usua, 1989). The Ijaw men came with their boats to Ogharegin from where Iginua and his men, about 70 in number, were conveyed to Ijaw land. Iginua and his followers were Benis who knew nothing about life of the sea. They were therefore frightened at the site of the ever expanding sea (Nwabueze, 1995). The

Ijaw taught Iginua and his men the art of swimming and fishing and how to live generally on the sea. They also gave their daughters in marriage to Iginua.

In 1991, Warri North Local Government Area with headquarters in Koko was initially meant for the Ijaws of Gbaramatu, Ogbe-Ijoh, Isaba and Egbeme Clans with headquarters at Oporoza.

In 1997, Warri-South Local Government Area, with headquarters in Ogbe-Ijoh for the Ijaws in Obe-Ijoh, Isabo and Gbaramatu, was created along with others by the head of state in October, 1997. The government later swayed to change the name to Warri-South-West Local Government Area, whose headquarters was relocated to Ogidigben for the Itsekiri. It is necessary to state here that there are two Warri towns: Ode Itsekiri and Warri Township (Ireyefoju, 1990). Crisis in Bayelsa state of the Niger-Delta started because of agitation for resource control. Then in November 1999, youths in Yenagoa Bayelsa State held a meeting where they agitated for this resource control issue (Ezegbe, 1992). The community crisis boils down to resource control, because the people are comfortable they will not have time to fight. Infact, the Niger Delta Region problems have not been properly handled by the governments and the area is faced with poor living conditions (Mezieobi, 1994).

Causes of Ethnic Crisis and Youth Restiveness in the Niger-Delta Region

Ethnic crisis are situations of unrest and social upheaval between two or more ethnic groups and this emanated from long term unsettled cases with a serious effect on lives and properties in the affected area. Ikime (1987), asserted that Niger-Delta rivalry are caused by cases of land dispute and struggle for the ownership of land. He went further by citing the Itsekiri and Urhobo crisis over the ownership of Warri kingdom and the destabilizing influence of oil prospecting companies that have raised the situation beyond normal. Another cause of the Warri imbroglio was the relocation and change of name of Warri-South Local Government Area, with head quarters in Ogbe-Ijoh for the Ijaws in Warri to Warri South West Local Government Area, with headquarters in Ogidigben for the Itsekiris.

Ethnic crisis are also caused by claims of leadership or struggle for supremacy of leadership like the case of Evwreni. The struggle for leadership and control of the ethnic group has resulted in several cases of crisis in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Crisis can occur between ethnic groups when there is a breach of some tenets or aspect of culture of the other group, for example the crisis in River state was caused by breach of custom by youths of other ethnic groups (Nwabueze, 1995).

According to Mezieobi, Nkire, and Esu, (1999), ethnic crisis in Niger-Delta are caused by some other factors:

- i) Growing individualism the pretentious and hypocritical social solidarity, growing interpersonal and intra group altercations, mistrust, conflict and disrespect for order and constituted authority as well as absence of social security and protection cause crisis.

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- ii) Social- Political instability such as religious riots, boundary conflicts, inter ethnic warfare through politics etc.
- iii) Rapid urbanization which has defused the intensity of social activities in Niger-Delta region.
- iv) Poor-Socio-Economic conditions of the citizenry and the nation The hard economic times due to economic depression and economic planlessness in Nigeria has had a deleterious effect on the socioeconomic condition of the people. Under this circumstance, the citizenry is languishing in abject poverty and starvation without any social security benefits. This causes social upheaval and crisis.

These and many others cause ethnic crisis in the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria. The following are reasons why youths remain restive. According to Usua (1989).

1. **Unemployment:** Many of the youths in Niger-Delta area are unemployed. The teaming group of graduates and non-graduates are depressed with the state of living without having something tangible to lay on to. Whereas they see and hear about their mates earning huge sums of money in the oil industries and political offices. This stirs up their youthful anger and they resort to violence (Filder, 1998).
2. **Economic Down Turn** The Niger Delta area is not experiencing something different from the plague of hardship, inflation and high cost of living currently affecting Nigerians. The tales of the towns and cities seem to be worsened from day to day as the cost of living increases. There is daily rise in the cost of foodstuff, house rent, clothing and other wares. The pains in the hearts of the youth, thus become glaring. Questions that the youths usually raise are: Why are we suffering in the midst of plenty? All the money realized from the crude oil explored from our soil, what are they used for? (Usua, 1989).
3. **Financial Gain** Youths in the area have in recent time adopted the hijacking and kidnapping method of deviancy. They implement their plans by kidnapping any expatriate who may likely be on duty in the water ways and thereafter request for huge sums of money before his release. Their intention is not to kill such person but to realize money for their selfish ends. Pipeline vandalization, which has stained many in Delta and Abia, are for financial ends (Soanes, 2001).
4. **Agitation for Social Amenities** Youths sometimes agitate for good roads, electricity, housing, health centres and schools. In most cases, they do it violently.
5. **Tribal Conflicts** The problem of boundary adjustments, rulership and local government creation has remained indelible factors resulting in constant wars in the Niger-Delta area. These are factors to be looked into in the Ijaw, Urhobo via Itsekiri crisis in the Warri region of Delta state (Usua, 1989).
6. **Marginalization/ Recognition** Sometimes, the youths feel marginalized from the events of things going on within and outside the country. They feel their area is neglected and they are not recognized. They therefore show their exploits to prove their existence (Ikime, 1977).
7. **Political Reasons** Youths clamouring for political positions at the local government level usually instigate their fans to get things done by all means.

Some youths are paid money to enthrone whom they want at all cost. This leads to party clashes, of which youths are once involved. This dispensation of democracy ushered in, so many deviances through the youth in the Niger-Delta Area (Ezegbe, 1992).

Implications of Ethnic Crisis and Youth Restiveness in the Niger – Delta for Agricultural Production

Ethnic crisis in Niger-Delta has affected both agricultural, economic, political and social activities in the area. In respect to agriculture, during periods of crisis, fishermen cannot carryout their fishing occupations as a result of pollution in their rivers. Farmers as well cannot grow their crops because their land is being damaged. Some farmers are even killed during that process putting their farms at a standstill. The loss of lives had reduced-dramatically in the rural areas of the Niger - Delta (Ireyefoju, 1990). Marketing of agricultural produce during crisis period becomes problematic; farmers will at that stage loose their products as they get spoilt. Insecurity of farm products is a fact of life in Nigeria during crisis (Olaitan, 1992).

From the foregoing therefore, it is pertinent that ethnic crisis had various agricultural implications ranging from loss of lives and properties to destruction of farm produce (Nwabueze, 1995).

During ethnic crisis, crop produced in the farm are destroyed, since most of the battles are carried out in the farm. According to Olaitan (1992), livestock production is cut short and most animals are starved to death. Many cases of destruction and raiding of farms have been recorded some decades ago (Okere, 1995).

Many fishermen have lost their lives during the time of ethnic crisis; their fishing gadgets/vessels are completely destroyed putting their fishing activities to an end. The few crops and livestock produced that are available cannot be marketed to nearby villages/towns, since there are restricted movement. Most of these farm products get spoilt in the hands of the farmers (Soanes, 2001).

Farmers at times of crisis suffer a lot because their farm business will be closed down and that their welfare is reduced to the barest minimum. From the foregoing, it could be deduced that agricultural activities during the period of ethnic crisis are short lived and terminated (Usua, 1989). Youth restiveness in Niger - Delta has led to loss of agricultural produce, pollution of land and water through oil spillage which result from pipeline vandalism by the youths. The oil spillage render the land difficult to till and unproductive, and unfit for crop production in the region; oil spillage on water bodies also affect the activities of the fish farmers because most fish in the water bodies would have been kill and also destroyed agricultural farmlands and crop cultivated in that area thereby resulting to great loss of agricultural products (Ajokporish, 1999).

Ways of Controlling Ethnic Crisis and Youth Restiveness in Niger Delta

Since it is obvious that ethnic crisis has negative implications for agricultural production in Niger - delta area, a plausible control measure should be adopted to reduce the occurrence of ethnic crisis (Ajokporisi and Ifie, 1999). According to Ireyefoju (1990), ethnic crisis could be controlled through orientation. This would come through education, such as citizenship education in schools to teach the youths the right type of values and national consciousness which will bring national unity. He further suggested that inter-marriage should be encouraged among the ethnic groups in the area to cement their relationship and love for one another. Ezegebe (1992) opined that individual co-operation is also needed to create the atmosphere of easy relationship that was existing among those ethnic groups before the struggle and crisis.

The government should device an acceptable system of allocating social amenities to the people of these areas. Government should try as much as possible to solve that problem in Warri area by reinstating the Warri-South Local Government Area, with its headquarters in Ogbeloh as originally announced. Creation of Egbema Local Government Area, with headquarters in Ogbinbiri, as recommended by the Arthur Mbauefo panel in 1996.

In Bayelsa State, the government should ensure that the resource control money in that area is used equitably so that peace can at least return. In other areas of Niger-Delta the government should provide adequate social and basic amenities for the people in order to reduce their long period of suffering and poverty.

Youth restiveness can be controlled when our leaders lead by good example, when there are jobs, when there is food on the table and our youths have a hope for better tomorrow. Job creation and training scheme for youths will reduce youth restiveness. Government and the private sector should make it as a policy to train the youth in their locality in different vocations to enable them to be industrious and self employed (Ajokporisi and Ifie, 1999).

Conclusions

This paper revealed that ethnic crisis and youth restiveness are caused by some factors such as land disputes and struggle for the ownership of land, claims of supremacy for leadership and breach of some tenets of the culture of other ethnic groups. Youth restiveness is caused by unemployment, lack of commitment by government, financial gain, marginalization and so on. Implications of ethnic crisis and youth restiveness on agricultural production in the area include: destruction of lives and properties. Adequate control measures were suggested as ways of controlling ethnic crisis.

Recommendations

For agriculture to play its pivotal role of sustaining the citizenry of this country and Niger-Delta region in particular, the following suggestions should be implemented

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to reduce ethnic crisis: There is need for serious orientation through education such as citizenship-education in primary, secondary and tertiary institutions of learning. Enlightenment campaign through radio and television programmes to educate the youths and the general masses on the importance of peaceful living, inter-marriages should be encouraged among the ethnic groups in the region.

Individual cooperation is also needed to create an atmosphere of cordial relationship that existed among these ethnic groups before the struggle and crisis. Other recommendations include:

- i) Diversification of our economic base to reduce dependence on oil.
- ii) Supporting anti corruption and graft policies.
- iii) Adequate funding and monitoring of NDDC (Niger Delta Development Commission) to enhance performance.
- iv) Eradication of gas flaring to preserve the ecosystem.
- v) Capacity building through provision of education, small and medium scale enterprises to address the issue of restiveness and unemployment.
- vi) Development of the communities where oil exploration, production and transportation take place, into satellite towns.
- vii) Enactment of laws and the subsequent implementation to prosecute youths guilty of misconduct.
- viii) Youths should be integrated into decision-making processes about government policies. Youth's representative should unveil their plights to the government and employ dialogue.
- ix) Government should organize youth enlightenment campaigns to give the youths proper orientation about the dangers and effects of their rampages and vandalism.

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