

Circumscribing Conflicts in the Resources Endowed Niger Delta Communities of Nigeria

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Abstract

Violent conflicts remain unabated in the Niger Delta communities of Nigeria despite efforts of successive governments and international organisations to broker peace in the area. Though the Nigerian governments set up commissions for addressing the protracted conflicts in oil producing areas where over 90 percent of the country's revenue is generated, the needs of communities in the area have not been met and violent conflicts continue to escalate in the area. How can the new trends of conflicts especially youth militancy and constant attacks on the multinational oil companies in the Niger Delta be curtailed without infringements on human rights? Using an interpretive approach with insights from historical and contemporary theoretical perspectives, various studies were reviewed and 24 Key Informant Interviews were conducted with stakeholders in four oil producing Niger Delta communities purposively selected from Bayelsa, Delta and Rivers states of Nigeria. Respondents were purposively drawn from different groups comprising community/religious leaders, youth activists, government officials, managers of multi-national oil companies and members of National Union of Petroleum Engineering and Natural Gas (NUPENG). Findings indicate that opinions differ among different groups concerning conflict resolution mechanisms in the Niger Delta. While government officials and multinational oil companies were optimistic about mechanisms for conflicts control, youth activists and labour leaders were pessimistic about the possibility of lasting peace in the study area. However, community and religious leaders perceived structural barriers such as interventions efforts that failed to facilitate peace, rising spate of hostage taking by militant youth and inadequate infrastructure. These findings confirm the reports that efforts to harmoniously integrate warring parties have failed to materialise in the Niger Delta. However, what appear as intractable conflicts are informed by divergent interests of state elites and local leaders over the modalities for managing the prevailing circumstances in the Niger Delta. The study concludes with strong recommendations.

Keywords: Niger Delta, resources exploitation, violent conflict, youth militancy, Nigeria

Introduction

A dominant view in peace and conflict studies is that conflict is inevitable in human societies. This perception however includes the assumption that acute and chronic conflicts hamper socio-economic development. The lingering violence in the Niger Delta (the homeland of several ethnic minorities marginalised by the Nigerian governments and multinational oil companies) has attracted concerns. Successive Nigerian governments and international organisations attempted to promote peace in the Niger Delta but conflicts remain prevalent in the region, a least developed region which occupies a strategic position in the formation, sustenance and survival of Nigeria due to its abundant oil resources. Presently, deployment of the state coercive apparatus has taken precedence over the needed

development projects in the region. Thus, the region has been plunged into resurgent war against itself as well as the state and multinational oil corporations. How have the Niger Delta communities, the Nigerian state, and the multinational oil corporations managed the war? What are the social forces fueling the war and how can they improve?

The above questions coupled with the urgent need for policy formulation to prevent youth militancy provide motivation for the study. Unarguably, time is ripe for providing a significant insight into sustainable modalities for peaceful resolution of protracted conflicts in the Niger Delta. Studies revealed the reasons for the conflicts in the Niger Delta but the management of emerging trends of violence in the region remains understudied. This study attempted to fill the void by circumscribing views of different groups on mechanisms for controlling the persistent youth militancy and hostage taking in the Niger Delta. Based on documentary evidence and exploration of insiders' account, the protracted conflicts and some emergent trends of violence that contributed to insecurity and declining peace in the Niger Delta were examined in the study.

The sociological analysis of the cultural contexts of conflicts in the study area was guided by different perspectives of social change (Flacks 1971; Bell 1976; Larkin 1979; Bell 1980). Within colonial and post colonial structures in Nigeria, different social realms have produced different rhythms of change and un-integrated unified groups. Diverse groups in the country were successfully amalgamated but not adequately integrated. Following the amalgamation the inherent contradictions built into the Niger Delta led people to move in contrary directions. The emergent violent conflicts in the Niger Delta were located within contradictions between state elites and multi-national oil companies on the one hand and the youth and all their perceived enemies of progress on the other hand. Contradiction connotes the incompatibility of interests among different groups in a society.

Studies illuminate contradictions that the youth in post-scarcity society need to negotiate (Wyn & White 2000). Young people are pulled into contradictory directions due to weakening of traditional sources of identity and the expansion of cultural possibilities (Melucci 1996; Furlong & Cartmel 1997; Maira & Soep 2004). Such contradictory forces that youth need to negotiate are further intensified by the process of globalization, which makes a description of youth more complicated (Cohen 1997; Jeffrey & McDowell 2004; Maira & Soep 2004). The complication in the conceptualisation of youth opens up multiple channels of influence and produce symbolic possibilities, which affect youth's understanding of cultural practices (Giddens 1996; Melucci 1996).

The study will examine whether these channels and possibilities play out in a contextual analysis of emergent violence and youth militancy, which represent a new form of local resistance against internal and external oppressions in the Niger Delta. Results of the study will provide pellucid understanding to promote local knowledge and expand world scholarship on youth agency in the Niger Delta conflicts and serve as baseline data for subsequent research on the issue. The next sections of the paper cover general overview of conflicts in Nigeria followed by the Niger Delta conflicts situations. Methodology and findings of the study are also discussed to guide the conclusions and recommendations.

General Overview of Conflicts in the Nigerian Societies

Divergent histories of diverse ethnic groups, the character of the state, forces of globalisation and endemic socio-economic problems such as poverty, unemployment and crime make Nigeria susceptible to conflicts. Following the 1884/5 Berlin Conference which preceded the official political conquest and the establishment of the Royal Niger Company, different groups with irreconcilable differences were found in northern and southern protectorates and subsequently amalgamated in a territory presently known as Nigeria, the most diverse and the most populous country in Africa. The amalgamation accentuated ethnic consciousness resulting into proliferation of ethno-religious conflicts across the nooks and crannies of the country (Otite 2000). The most significant groups are Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba, Igbo and Ijaw. The Hausa/Fulani traditionally dominated in the north, Yoruba in the southwest, Igbo in the east, and Ijaw in the Niger Delta.

Rivalries among these ethnic groups have resulted in protracted conflicts and political instability resulting into the internal restructuring of Nigeria from being the territory of the Royal Niger Company to protectorates, regions, states and geo-political zones. The conflicts arising from several restructuring were the leading ideological foundations for ethnocentrically wired social structure of politics, religion, economy, education, and armed forces. The Hausa/Fulani dominate politics while the Yoruba and Igbo dominate education and economy. Members of each major ethnic group were largely concentrated in certain political parties. However, the Ijaw and a pocket of other ethnic minorities have resisted marginalisation in their agitation for recognition in the country.

Arising from agitations for recognition, Nigeria underwent a civil war from 1967 to 1970 and since the 1980s there has been a resurgence of identity based conflicts in the country (Adejumobi 2005). The Nigerian civil war created a new wealthy class that was largely drawn from the rank of assorted contractors who supplied arms, ammunitions, equipments, food

rations and vehicles to the Armed Forces during the war. The end of the war laid the foundation for the emergence of a new social class of the nouveau rich who made huge profits from supplying arms and ammunition to warriors in violence prone areas (Erinosho 2007). Consequently, communities and clans in different geo-political zones spanning through rural and urban areas have taken up arms against each other.

In the south-western Nigeria, Ife-Modakeke conflicts claimed several lives and destroyed properties. In the south-south, the trajectory of inter and intra-communal conflicts, which have defied solution include the Ijaw-Ilaje conflict, the Umuleri-Aguleri conflict, the Ogoni-Andoni conflict, the Ogoni-Okrika conflict, the internecine conflict between the two Ijaw villages of Bassambiri and Ogbolomabiri in Nembe and the recurrent conflicts between the Ijaw, Urhobo and Itsekiri over the ownership of Warri, a major centre of oil exploration in Nigeria (Ibeanu 2006). In the south-east, the Tiv-Jukun conflicts have taken different dimensions. In the north-east, the Biu-Kanuri conflicts threatened the survival of the communities while in the north-west and north-central, conflicts among different groups such as Zango-Kataf and Chamba-Kuteb have created indelible catastrophes.

Besides, religious conflicts fuelled by the introduction of Sharia penal code in northern Nigeria ignited conflicts in major cities of Kaduna, Kano, Jos and Lagos. These conflicts have led to internal displacement and spatial relocations in Nigeria (Egwu 2001). The scales of tragedy that often accompany identity based violence in Nigeria is monumental (Adejumobi 2005). Since 2000, an unprecedented loss of properties and social displacements has occurred and thousands of people have lost their lives in communal, ethnic and religious conflicts. For instance, in February 2000, at least 1,400 people were reportedly killed, over 1,944 buildings including hotels, business centres and residential houses were destroyed and about 70,000 people were displaced during the religious conflict in Kaduna (Abdu 2002).

Similarly, in November 2001, at least 2000 people were killed, properties worth over N50 million were destroyed and 50,000 people were internally displaced during the Tiv-Jukun communal conflict (Abdu 2002). The overlapping boundaries of ethno-religious conflicts tend to make Nigeria a volatile country. This volatility became more pronounced in the emergence of a new dimension of ethnic militia urban violence. Different militia groups rose from various ethnic groups in the struggle for self determination orchestrated by the political crises of the 1990s. These emergent militia groups include the Oodua Peoples Congress in the southwest Nigeria, Arewa People's Congress in the northern Nigeria and Egbesu Boys and Ijaw Militant Youth in the southern Nigeria. However, internal divisions and emergence of factions have marred the organisational efficiency and leadership structure of some of the

ethnic militia. This contradiction has opened up doors of opportunities for unorganised youth to enlist themselves into the caricature of the mainstream militant groups for different purposes.

The internal and external forces that are sustaining the proliferation of conflicts and violence in Nigeria include the social construction of citizenship and ethnicity as well as globalisation and its concomitant defects. Inhabitants in Nigeria are categorised into indigenes and non indigenes depending on levels of their citizenship and this categorisation affects communal interaction and social exclusion. The indigenes are the sons and daughters of the soil who can lay claims in their communal territory, whereas, no matter how long settlers have resided in a particular locality they remain strangers and treated as non-indigenes. In Nigeria ethnic identity influences access to public goods such as employment, schools, land and political office and the urge to claim indigene status generates conflicts (Adejumobi 2005; Mustapha 1998). In the light of conflicts generated by the question of citizenship, the Federal Government set up a Presidential Committee on Practice of Citizenship in Nigeria in 2002 but the reports of the committee are still pending.

Unfortunately, the problem of nation building in Nigeria has not been laid to rest. Despite its remarkable potentials, Nigeria is among the most volatile countries in the world. Its heterogeneity is constantly manipulated by elites (traditional, religious and political) in their race for the control of the state resources. These elites constitute the non-productive unit thus suggesting that they are irrelevant in one Marxist sense of the production relations. They depend on the manipulation of the distributive systems of the state resources to derive personal benefits and sustain their hegemony through the state machineries such as the Police and the Armed Forces (Otite 2000). The Nigerian elites and their romance with the state fit the description in Louis Althusser's concepts of ideological state apparatus (ISA) and Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony as a means of maintaining the state in a capitalist society (Althusser 1997; Gramsci 1971).

The fallout of the aforementioned elite-state manipulation is the gruesome image of Nigeria in the international community. The World Bank estimated that 80 percent of energy revenues benefit only 1 percent of the population as a result of corruption. Outside the energy sector, Nigeria's economy is highly inefficient. Nigerian human capital is underdeveloped as it ranked 151 out of 177 countries listed in the 2004 United Nations Development Index. Nigeria is ranked among the world's 30 least developed countries. Despite Nigeria's rich endowment with natural and human resources, it is ranked among the poorest countries in the world.

The Human Development Index (2005) put Nigeria among the twenty countries with the lowest human development index, being ranked 158 in a table of 177 countries (UNDP 2005). An estimated 70.0 per cent of Nigerians live below the poverty line, compared with 27.2 per cent in 1980, 43.6 per cent in 1985 and 42.8 per cent in 1992. Nigeria thus hangs precariously, with approximately 47-48 per cent of the estimated 33 million persons in the labour force unemployed (UNDP 2004). Poverty ravages the country, as Nigeria ranked 57th out of 95 countries in the Human Poverty Index, and a record of relatively high social inequity with a Gini-coefficient value of 50.6, and a high score of gender-specific discrimination, as it ranked 122nd of 144 in the Gender Development Index (UNDP 2005).

The background of poor socio-economic development, poverty, and illiteracy has been linked to the low status of Nigerian youth, who daily battle with socio-cultural barriers, discriminations, and economically un-friendly political and legal structures (Aina 2007). However, the major controversies in Nigeria include many ethnic movements and calls for “National Conference” to resolve ethno-regional domination and promote equity between the majorities and minorities. The northern minorities are concerned about the Hausa-Fulani hegemony while the southern minorities worry about the external control of petroleum deposits found in their communities and apparent neglect of their region (Mustapha 1998; Nnoli 1998). The national contentions include the constitutions amendments which made the Federal Government more powerful but slowed down national development and the oil revenue allocation, which created furore resulting into the violation of human rights in the Niger Delta.

These have produced renewed interests in local resistance and two forms of nationalism (modern and traditional nationalism). The former is promoted by few educated elites while the latter is supported by ethnic traditionalists and royal symbolism (Oтите 2000). Examples of the new elites that emerged in the process of challenging the legitimacy of Nigeria and struggling against the state are the Ogoni and other popular militant groups in the oil producing communities. These elites have criticized multinational oil companies for constant environmental destruction and breaking up of their communities. A major argument of one Ogoni leader, Ken Saro Wiwa against Shell is that the environmental damage that caused the destruction of the Ogoni people was an act of genocide.

Saro Wiwa led many protests until Shell was forced to pull out of the Ogoni community in 1993. This was the event that prepared the ground for sudden arrest and the gruesome murder of Saro Wiwa and eight other Ogoni activists by the Abacha-led military government. However, following the 1995 state execution of Saro Wiwa and other Ogoni

activists, the nature of agitation in the Niger Delta has radically shifted from being a platform for peaceful protests to a stage of guerilla warfare due to the matrix of the multinational oil companies and the Nigerian governments attempts to undermine the power of youth in the oil producing communities.

Contradictory Situations and Conflict in the Niger Delta

The Niger Delta has an estimated population of 29 million people, the bulk of which lives in rural fishing and farming communities. Their socio-economic conditions are worrisome as 73% of the people lack access to safe drinking water, about 70% of households lack electricity, 94% of the population lack access to telephones and primary school enrolment rate is below 40% (Ibeanu 2006). These situations show that poverty and underdevelopment remains widespread in the Niger Delta in spite of its abundant resources (Okoko 2004). The Niger Delta in Nigeria is one of the world's largest wetlands and the largest delta in Africa. The geographical spread and population projection of the Niger Delta in Nigeria is tabulated below.

Estimated Population of the Niger Delta

State	2005	2010	2015	2020
Abia	3,230,000	3,763,000	4,383,000	5,106,000
Akwa Ibom	3,343,000	3,895,000	4,537,000	5,285,000
Bayelsa	1,710,000	1,992,000	2,320,000	2,703,000
Cross River	2,736,000	3,187,000	3,712,000	4,325,000
Delta	3,594,000	4,186,000	4,877,000	5,681,000
Edo	3,018,000	3,516,000	4,096,000	4,871,000
Imo	3,342,000	3,894,000	4,535,000	5,283,000
Ondo	3,025,000	3,524,000	4,105,000	4,782,000
Rivers	4,858,000	5,659,000	6,592,000	7,679,000
Total	28,856,000	33,616,000	39,157,000	45,715,000

Source: Niger Delta Region Survey Based on National Population Commission Data (cited by Ibeanu 2006)

The context of the Niger Delta struggle is defined by the Nigerian national question with grave implication for conflicts. Dimensions of conflicts in the Niger Delta include conflicts between the multi-national oil companies, the Nigerian State and the host communities as well as intra and inter communal conflicts. Complexities of these conflicts stem from contradictions in the exploitative production systems and hostile exchange relations

between two major coalitions comprising the multi-national oil companies and Nigerian State on one hand and the youth and peasant communities on other hand. The major oil companies in the area include Shell, Exxon-Mobil, Elf Aquitaine, Chevron-Texaco, Eni-Agip, and TotalFinaElf (Iwayemi 2006; Ibeanu 2006). Their operations are principally organized as joint ventures with the Nigeria National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC). In the 1970s, the Nigerian governments used indigenization policy to acquire 60% equity in the major multinational oil companies and 80% in Shell-BP. Some multinational oil companies however abandoned their operations in Nigeria due to the implementation of the policy. The attendant decrease in foreign investments and the perceived failure of indigenization policy motivated the Nigerian governments to move towards partial deregulation and commercialization of various operations of the NNPC, which was commercialized with the creation of 11 subsidiaries in 1988. The governments have shifted emphasis from ownership of the petroleum industry in favour of complete deregulation of the industry and selling of NNPC. However, petroleum sector workers embarked on strike in August 2002 to protest against government attempt to privatize the NNPC owned refineries. The Nigerian governments were however reputed for curtailing labour rights and weakening labour movements as an important part of their economic strategies (Okafor 2007).

Generally the dependence of the Nigerian governments on multinationals oil companies has been on the increase. Since 1960s, oil has played a strategic role in the economics and politics of Nigeria (Iwayemi 2006). The Nigerian governments enacted laws to claim ownership of all mineral deposits including crude oil in any part of the country. In April 2002 the Supreme Court ruled that the Federal Government should control offshore petroleum deposits. This ruling was enforced despite the Niger Delta States' petitions for an increase in revenue allocation from 13% to 50% of oil resources derived from each State. Thus, petroleum has become the mainstay of the Nigerian political economy with close relationship between multinational oil companies and the state. Exploitation in oil exploration and violation of the rights of community people as a result of the promulgation of obnoxious legislations have intensified violent conflicts between emerging interest groups within and between communities in the Niger Delta.

The internal conflicts range between elite groups and between youth organisations as well as between the urban resident elites and the village community residents. Of the two major external opponents, multi-national oil companies are in more physical contact with the communities and their expropriated inhabitants. The deprived communities have made more demands for social services from the oil companies compared to the often unreliable Nigerian

governments. However, the oil companies have collaborated with the Nigerian government in the process of applying violence as a means of pacifying the protesting communities (Pegg 1999).

The numerous negative environmental impacts of crude oil mining and refining have been documented. Pollution arising from oil spillage destroys marine life and crops, makes water unsuitable for fishing and renders many hectares of farmland unusable. Apart from oil spills, there have been other far-reaching environmental damages in the Niger Delta. The Nigerian State has applied a strategy of systematic peasant deprivation to the great disadvantage of the Niger Delta communities. This strategy includes the inequitable revenue allocation formula, exploitative and hostile oil companies-communities relations, acute ecological degradation, ineffective environmental regulations and violently repressive state intervention against reactive militancy of expropriated youth in oil producing communities as well as the promulgation of very exploitative and repressive legislation to facilitate foreign access to the oil resources of the peasant Niger Delta communities.

State aggression against the people of the Niger Delta has taken four main forms namely, constant harassment of the leaders of popular movements and organizations, instigating inter-communal conflicts, especially along ethnic, religious and clan lines, instigating internal division of popular organizations and direct repression using the army and police. In the Niger Delta, national security contradicts the security of nationals because of the politics of oil. National security takes precedence over everything else. Security of oil facilities is the paramount concern irrespective of the impact on the local inhabitants and environment. On the part of local people in the Niger Delta and their organizations, the condition for security is the maintenance of the carrying capacity of the environment.

The aggression of the Nigerian State against the Niger Delta was experienced by the Ijaw ethnic minority in Bayelsa State between 1998 and 1999 through the Egbesu wars and Odi massacre. The repression of the Niger Delta by the military had left the region highly charged and demobilized. The Nigerian army invaded Odi in 1999 and killed hundreds of people and practically razed the once thriving town. Many communities in the Niger Delta still live under heavy military surveillance such as Operation Hakuri II and Operation Restore Hope. In the highly volatile creeks of the Western Delta, particularly in Delta State, military patrols have summarily killed hundreds of people, ostensibly in trying to dislodge armed gangs that steal crude oil and abduct oil workers. The situation has worsened since April 2004 when a team of Chevron workers returning to land from an offshore facility ran into a gang of oil thieves. Unfortunately, the Chevron workers had a military patrol escorting them and in

the ensuing shootout between the soldiers and robbers two Americans and five Nigerians in the Chevron team were killed (Ibeanu 2006)

This has led to the displacements and death of many people especially women and children (Ibeanu 2006). In many cases, state officials and oil companies either generate or fuel conflicts through their antics of divide and rule. This trajectory of conflict has been worsened by party politics since 1999. In Warri, around the time of the inauguration of the new civilian government in May/June 1999, violence broke out in and almost 200 people were killed in raids and counter raids by Itsekiri and Ijaw ethnic militias. This violence was so brutal that the Governor of Delta State (James Ibori) imposed a curfew (Ibeanu 2006).

The level of violence in the region remains relatively high and the acrimonious relationships of communities, the Nigerian governments and oil companies persist. Oil politics, creation of states and redrawing of ethnic boundaries were significant factors fuelling violence. The Federal Military Government changed the administrative structure of the country from four regions to twelve states. Subsequently, the Eastern Region with a predominantly Igbo ethnic composition declared itself the State of Biafra on May 30, 1967. Ethnic minorities such as the Efik, Ijaw and Ogoni opted out of the Biafra struggle. The Nigerian governments essentially created states (12 states in May 1967, 19 states in February 1976, 21 states in September 1987, 30 states in 1991 and 36 states in 1996) as a strategy of solving some of the most intractable ethnic conflicts. The outcomes of states creation have however been summarized as follows:

“These new developments, which were responses to ethnic-sectional demands for new identities or consolidations of old ones, also created new bases for contested territorial and other claims, as well as competition for access or succession to high political and other offices. They were also responses to protests against perceived sectional marginalisation in respect of participation in, and the dividends derived from, the political and economic development of Nigeria under democratic process” (Otite 2000: vii).

The bases of contestation that emerged from states creation have direct bearing on the new dimensions of conflicts in the Niger Delta where youth mobilized communities to engage the alliance of the state and oil companies for improved livelihoods. The Nigerian State and their cronies have benefited immensely from petroleum since it was discovered in the Niger Delta in commercial quantities in 1956 and oil resource extraction has adversely affected the Niger Delta for about five decades (Owabukeruyele 2000; Eteng 1997; Gbadegesin 1997).

In August 1997, over 10,000 youths in the Niger Delta demonstrated at Aleibiri in Ekeremor Local Area of the region to demand an end to all Shell activities in the Niger Delta. Aleibiri was chosen as the focus of the demonstration because, according to the youths, Shell had refused to clean an oil spill that occurred there on 18 March 1997. Oil extraction has caused negative socio-economic and environmental problems in the Niger Delta (Pegg 1999). The Niger Delta communities have remained chronically underdeveloped and abjectly pauperised despite the abundant oil mineral resources endowments in the region. This situation is due to perennial exploitation in the production exchange relationship between the Nigerian state, the multi-national oil corporations and the peasant class in the oil bearing communities.

The environmental consequences and resultant underdevelopment of the Niger Delta communities as a result of oil extraction can be explained within the context of internal and external production exchange relationships. The Nigerian oil industry has fashioned a remarkable economic growth for the country but its petroleum production adversely affected fishing and farming which are the traditional occupations in the region. The upsurge of oil exploration has intensified farm land pollution, increase in the magnitude of landless farmers, and rural urban pressures. These situations are current antinomies of development in the Niger Delta. It has been clearly demonstrated that:

“Apart from loss of farms, oil spills have led to extensive deforestation with no adequate replanting practices...this in effect has shortened fallow periods, compounded land use degradation and led to a loss of soil fertility and consequently erosion of the top soil". (Gbadegesin 1997: 9)

State actions such as the 1969 Petroleum Act and 1978 Land Use Decree worsened the situation as they were primarily promulgated to restrict community access to land. Conversely, the Nigerian governments granted multinational investors unrestricted access to explore communal land for oil exploration. Local elites in the oil producing communities have reacted violently against the State and oil companies through social movement and the use militia tactics. They organised their movement to challenge an inequitable transfer of oil resources in the Niger Delta to the detriments of local people in the region. Similarly, unequal exchange relationship between the core and the periphery occurred in Latin America, Africa and other developing countries. These regions witnessed the failure of the intensification of export drive of primary natural resources as the basis for modernisation and development of

the periphery. The Niger Delta is a classical model of enormous environmental degradation resulting from oil extraction for export. The situation is succinctly described as follows:

"What currently prevails in the Nigerian Southern oil enclave is a specific variant of internal colonialism... The specific, highly exploitative ... relations between the Nigerian state and the oil-bearing communities explains why the enormous oil wealth generated is scarcely reflected in the living standard and life chances of the peasant inhabitants of the oil-bearing enclave... The beneficiaries have always remained the government in power, multinational corporations and multilateral funding agencies" (Eteng 1997: 21)

Materials and Methods

The study was conducted in the Niger Delta offshore communities characterised by large quantities of oil exploration and prevalence of violence. Both secondary and primary data were gathered for the study. The secondary data included various published empirical studies of conflicts and violence in the Niger Delta. The primary data consisted information obtained from 24 key informants selected through a combination of purposive and chain referral sampling methods. Four communities (Warri, Escravos, Okrika and Nembe) were purposively selected based on their proximity to oil exploration spots and violence scenes in the Niger Delta. Using a chain referral sampling technique, key informants (adults who held leadership positions and consecutively lived in their communities for 30 years) were contacted for interviews and requested to introduce other key members among various groups in their communities.

The respondents for the study comprised 4 youth activists, 8 community/religious leaders, 4 managerial staff of oil companies, 4 officials of Niger Delta Development Commission and 4 members of NUPENG. Key Informant Interview was employed to gather information from all the 24 respondents selected from 6 groups across 4 communities in the Niger Delta. Different groups comprising community/religious leaders, youth activists, government officials, managers of multi-national oil companies and members of NUPENG were interviewed separately in the selected communities. In line with ethical principles in the social science research, the purpose of the study was communicated to the respondents for obtaining their consent and assent.

Four research assistants were employed for the study among the natives of the study area to gain entry without much difficulty and provide insiders' accounts of the problem under investigation. Their understanding of local idioms and cultural oaths facilitated

acceptance and encouraged respondents to freely express their opinions. The atmosphere of the interview was so relaxed that the respondents freely narrated their experiences and aspirations. All the 24 respondents participated actively in the key informant semi structured interview conducted by 4 native research assistants in different places ranging from homes and offices depending on the preferences of the respondents and the importance of conducting an interview in a natural setting (Johnson 2002; Eder & Fingerson, 2002; Seidman 1991).

In keeping with a semi structured approach to interviewing (Seidman, 1991), interview protocols were developed but were used primarily as a guide while following the narratives of each respondent, who was asked questions covering different topics such as chronic problems and new trend of conflicts in the Niger Delta, memories of encounter with militant youths, factors fuelling violent conflicts and perception of possible solutions to youth militancy and hostage taking in the Niger Delta. Most interviews lasted 45 minutes to 1 hour, but six interviews lasted more than 1 hour. The primary data were collected in four communities from 9th July to 16th August 2007. All interviews were conducted in either English or Pidgin. The data were transcribed and translated verbatim in the process of using ZY Index and ethnographic technique for data analysis.

Findings

Narratives of the New Trend of Violent Conflicts in the Niger Delta

The age of the respondents ranged from 25 years to 70 years. Twenty men and four women participated in the study. Their socio-economic background varied widely. There was general agreement on escalation of conflicts and severity of violence in the Niger Delta. Awareness is high about the prevalence of militant youths in the Niger Delta. It was generally agreed that militant youth have multiplied and they have expanded their scope of operations. The activities of militant youths vary from oil bunkering to pipeline vandalisation. They also engage in other heinous crimes. The multi-national companies and the Niger Delta communities are disturbed about the increase in the spate violent activities by militant youth. An elder stated as follows:

“Militant youths are many nowadays. They are in different groups. Some are in much organised groups while some are just operating on their own. Among the group that is not well organised their members are not much because we see them. They are here with us but we can't say this is where they live... You only see them when they are parading on the water”

Different organisations were mentioned to be directly associated with youth militancy. The Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People was established in 1990 at the early

beginnings of military repression of minority ethnic communities of the Niger Delta. It was established to serve as the umbrella organization uniting Ogoni organizations. In 2003 and 2004, the Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force (NDPVF) led by Asari Dokubo and the Niger Delta Vigilantes (NDV) led by Tom Ateke became more popular in Okrika as a result of their violent clashes. These militant youth organisations have become the most dreaded armed gangs in the Niger Delta. Some respondents described the militant youths as political thugs used by powerful political elites to settle political scores during political crises. Their privileged positions give them the impetus for the possession of modern arms and ammunitions. They are generally well equipped and they can challenge any organisation operating in the Niger Delta.

The following comments shed lights on the power of the militant youth:

“The militant youth forced organisations to pay development fee. Oil company pay millions of naira to each community as development fee every year... during festivals, they ask for donation of money and other materials like rice, cloth, drinks, goats, cows, and all sorts of things”

“The militant youth are deadly, when you see them, you see them with guns, not like the kind of gun you see with the Nigeria Police or ordinary soldier, their own gun is correct rifle...AK 47, have you ever seen this type of gun before, ok. You will see the gun with many of the militant that move around in this area”

“They move in groups, it is rare for one militant youth to move alone. They move in group. They are different from ordinary people around the Niger Delta. They put red ribbon on their heads. They also use the ribbon on their guns. They move at different directions but one may not be too sure of where they are heading to”

It was gathered that the attack of militia youth goes beyond oil companies. They are involved in piracy and other crimes. Cases of militant attack on politicians were also mentioned as other sources of worries among communities in the Niger Delta. Respondents stated that militant youth might attack government officials whom they alleged to have misappropriated funds and colluded with oil companies. Militant youth have been collecting ransom from their captives. On their part, oil companies argued that militant youth

maliciously targeted their installations and workers for selfish motives. It was mentioned that the oil companies had spent more on security than on development of their host communities. One respondent states as follows:

“We employ hundreds of naval men, we employ hundreds of soldiers, we spend on security daily and we give allowances to our security personnel. The daily allowance we pay alone can be used for better things in the host community if there is peace”.

Factors Fuelling Violent Conflicts in the Niger Delta

When asked the factors that fuelled conflicts in the Niger Delta, the informants mentioned different factors. They emphasised the role of the internal divisions among elders in the communities, activities of the oil companies, insensitivity of the Nigerian Government to the dilapidation of social infrastructure and increase in the number of militant youth. While responding to the question bordering on factors that affect conflicts some informants mentioned poverty and ignorance, which they said impacted negatively on living standards of the aggrieved people and prevented them from knowing when to fight and when not to fight. Other factors include restlessness. This group believed that poverty and ignorance are responsible for large proportion of violent conflicts in the Niger Delta. However, discordant views were held over the reactions to youth militancy. One respondent stated thus:

“Oil companies have been stealing our resources for several years. Many of them are here... we have the likes of Chevron, Texaco, Mobil, Total and so on...I can go on and on. You see! These companies do not like our people at all, they only take good care of themselves, they are enjoying very well, and they take good care of their staff, especially those who are foreigners”

Another respondent mentioned that:

“Oil companies, very powerful set of people! They are controlling everywhere. They can tell the government what to do. Do they even trust the government? I don't think so, because after governments give them soldiers and police to protect them they also use their own security gadgets which they use to intimidate people. Without iron hand, it will be difficult to face them”

Youth unemployment has also contributed to rising violence in the Niger Delta as demonstrated below:

“They give better jobs to their own people. They only reserve petty jobs for few of our own people. They give better jobs to workers who are foreigners. All their technical jobs go to the foreign workers. It is these foreign workers who know the secret of the oil industry and they will not tell anybody. Even our people that are working with them are only doing menial jobs and they will never allow our people to move close to certain areas of operation. How can there be peace if there is no trust”.

“Our people are suffering. The politicians do not leave here so they are pretending that everything is alright. But if you go down the waterside, you will see that people are left to fend for themselves. There is no good water to drink. Our children die of diseases; our youth don’t have sound education. Everybody is frustrated”

A religious leader however expressed a contrary opinion as follows:

“The oil companies work hand in hand with the communities to promote development. They set up skills acquisition centers to train youth in different vocations. The problem is with the youth themselves. Many of them are not ready to work. In some cases the oil companies give employment to natives, they give them slot of jobs, sometimes the oil companies ask the community to bring names of job applicants for immediate employment. However, the major problem is that many of the youth that are causing violence don’t want work. They already have money. Even if they are given employment on a platter of gold, rather than resume for work they prefer to sell the slot of their jobs to non-indigenes by collecting ransom depending on the type of job and the salary. In some cases their jobs to other people and reach agreement with their beneficiary so that they get their own share of the salary every month”

Mechanisms for Resolving Violent Conflicts in the Niger Delta

In reacting to the question “what do you think can be done to stop or reduce the lingering cases of hostage taking and youth militancy in the Niger Delta”, diverse responses were given as the informants were generally divided with regards to the possibility of stopping or reducing cases of hostage taking and youth militancy in the Niger Delta. Some of the informants said the crises would continue. The majority said community participation in collective dialogues, recognition of the needs of the people of the Niger Delta, removal of the state coercive apparatus and improved social responsibilities of oil companies in the Niger

Delta could reduce the spate of crises in the Niger Delta. The respondents however expressed worries on the perceived difficulties in bringing all the militant groups for collective discussion. They mentioned that different conflict resolution strategies and continuous surveillance would be needed to achieve lasting peace.

Respondents from oil companies described that the government capacity for providing a secure environment for their operations was weak. It was however mentioned that the militant youth could not overthrow management of oil companies. They saw the existing moves towards eradicating conflicts as inadequate. They argued that until the conflict situations are brought under control tangible development would not take place in the Niger Delta.

Some respondents maintained that as long as the Nigerian governments refuse to rework the formula for resource control and provide all the needs of the people of the Niger Delta there would be no peace in the country. It was mentioned that Nigeria governments were only interested in exploiting the God given oil resources that belong to the people of the Niger Delta. It was also stated that oil mining and exploration have been detrimental to Niger Delta communities. One informant quoted a Marxian dictum as follows:

“if peace is desirable violent conflict is inevitable. This is the belief of an average Ijaw youth; nobody can cheat us and go away, never!”

For this respondent, however, violence is a means towards ensuring peace in the Niger Delta. This opinion is equivalent to Marxist revolutionary approach to problem solving, while it is analogous to Gandhi’s non violence change perspective.

Discussion of Findings

There are many local voices competing to tell their own versions of the Niger Delta conflicts stories. The study circumscribed the views of different groups including youth activists, community/religious leaders, oil companies, members of oil workers union, and government officials. These groups narrated their experience on violent conflicts including youth militancy and hostage taking. As shown in the findings, conflict is considered a major problem in the Niger Delta. It has been a major obstacle to socio-economic development in the area. The increasing rates of vandalism of oil installations, kidnapping of oil workers and communal conflicts have been attributed to the prevalence of youth militancy and hostage taking in the region. For instance, between 1993 and 2003, the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) reported 1, 298 pirate attacks on oil facilities in the Niger Delta and in March 2004, Shell, Chevron and Elf were forced into production deferments of 155 million

barrel per day worth of \$1.7 billion loss of revenues as a result of crude oil theft, community disturbances and oil facilities destruction (Ikporupo 2007; Ibeanu 2006).

Popular militant organisations like MOSOP, NDPVF, NDV and the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) were described as very powerful and deadly. For instance, MEND is perceived by many government officials as an underground group specializing in the abduction of oil workers for ransom. Government perception of the militant youth has raised the tempo of secret military operations in which many local people are tortured and summarily executed in remote creeks and mangrove forests.

Different factors have been attributed to the protracted conflicts in the Niger Delta. Rather than focusing on a monolithic perspective, an idiographic approach was privileged in the explanation of Niger Delta conflicts. However, much of the blame was shifted on the Nigerian governments and the multi-national oil companies operating in the Niger Delta. Therefore the collision of internal and external pressures was recognised as the principal factor fuelling the escalation of conflicts in the Niger Delta. To match the collision of forces however, local attempts have been strengthened through youth agency and adoption of ideology of revolutionary movements with clandestine guerilla tactics. The situation in the Niger Delta finds expression in Anderson and Collins (1998) observation that oppression generates resistance. They suggested that oppression could be resisted effectively through organized actions within a group and coalition building with other groups.

Similarly, the militant youth in the Niger Delta seem to have joined forces with established organisations for training and procurement of arms and ammunitions. Following the death of Ken Saro Wiwa and other members of the movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), militant groups increased and became more violent. The Niger Delta is presently regarded as a region of violence. However, the region used to be a peaceful region of fun loving people. In the 1980s and 1990s, some organisations such as Association of Minority Oil States (AMOS) and MOSOP employed peaceful protests against the neglect of the Niger Delta. Following the Nigerian return to democracy in 1999, organised militant groups emerged from the dominant political parties and intensified the process of demanding economic and political justice for the Niger Delta region (Ikporupo 2007). Clearly, the emergence of different militant youth is political. The spate of assassinations of top politicians of the Niger Delta since 2003 is evidence of that youth militancy is political. Dr. Marshall Harry was assassinated in March 2003 and Chief A.K. Dikibo in February 2004. In August 2004, six people were killed, 50 houses razed and about 6,000 were rendered homeless when an armed gang thought to be members of NDPVF raided the Njemanze waterfront in Port

Harcourt. The attack was thought to be linked to the struggle between the Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force (NDPVF) led by Mujahid Asari Dokubo and Niger Delta Vigilantes led by Ateke Tom, both members of the ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) in Rivers State. Also in December 2004, a gang of armed youths believed to be members of the Egbesu cult, attacked the convoy of Rivers State Governor, Dr. Peter Odili, along the East-West Road in Port Harcourt. The fact that even the Governor was a target of gang attack shows a heightened level of political conflict and insecurity that is unprecedented in the region.

Contradictory realities have thrown up the conflicting relationship between militant youth and other groups in oil producing communities in the Niger Delta. The privatization and ethnicisation of politics in Nigeria, has resulted to a resource distribution system that alienates oil producing communities from the oil wealth. State legislations on the oil industry and manipulations of the revenue allocation system have made this possible (Ibaba 2007). This study confirms the findings that the causes of the conflicts are complex and interrelated, material deprivation is central to the conflicts. It highlights oil based environmental degradation induced productivity losses and occupational disorientation, inadequate compensation for damages caused by oil industry activities, poor channels of communication by the oil companies and failed community development programmes of the oil companies as factors fuelling the conflicting relationship.

There is agreement on the dire developmental situation and living conditions of the people of the Niger Delta and the need to increase the oil revenue accruing to the Niger Delta communities. There is a broad agreement on the legal, political and practical obstacles to the attainment of peace in the Niger Delta. Emphasis was placed on the intensive oil resource extraction which has resulted into environmental degradation, pollution, and poverty in the Niger Delta communities of Nigeria. The crosslink of these factors culminates in a complex exploitative relationship at the detriment of local communities. The intensification of oil export since the early 1960s led to deprivation, violence, socio-economic neglect in the region (Iwayemi 2006; Owabukeruyele 2000). The dramatic escalation of resource control conflict in the Niger Delta is anchored on economic deprivation and inequality in oil revenue distribution. These problems characterize fragile states, countries that lack the capacity to discharge their normal functions and drive forward development. However, the weak institutions, poverty, social inequalities, corruption, civil strife, armed conflicts and civil war are not original conditions but are rooted in specific historical contexts (Osaghae 2007). It is important to understand the internal and external factors if the problems are to be solved.

Unfortunately, the efforts to overcome some of these obstacles remain inadequate. The efforts of the Nigerian governments in addressing the Niger Delta Problem have not produced the desired results. Oil Mineral Producing Areas Development Commissions (OMPADEC) and Niger Delta Development Commissions (NDDC) could have helped to resolve conflicts in the area. NDDC was established to replace the military-established Oil Minerals Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC). Generally inadequate attention has been paid to the provision of facilities like education, health, roads, electricity and potable water by both government and oil companies. However, these facilities are available at oil installations, making oil companies arena of affluence in deprived communities. OMPADEC failed to execute several projects and it was scrapped. NDDC took off in January 2001 with a relatively high capital base. Although little progress has been made in the area of human rights violation, social conditions remain dire.

Many of the militant youths are not united. The oil companies and the Nigerian state rely on military approach to solving the problem. However, the military solution has not helped much. Many militant youth continue to unleash terror in the Niger Delta. The militant youth have spearheaded the political resistance against state oppression in the region. Addressing the situation would require a synergy of peace to be derived from different theoretical perspectives and strategic thinking combined with practical actions.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

The motivation for circumscribing different views on conflicts in the resources endowed Niger Delta Communities of Nigeria is to provide an array of insiders driven robust findings and scientific basis for sustainable conflict resolution policy. Findings from the study demonstrate that respondents from the Niger Delta recognised protracted conflicts, youth militancy and hostage taking as priority issues. Addressing these issues was viewed as critical in the process of promoting development. This partly explains the justification for the willingness and enthusiasm they displayed during the study. The forces associated with the proliferation of violent conflicts are complex and a holist attempt is required to deal with them. The observed multi factorial forces fuelling conflicts throws up a significant challenge and drives home the importance of incorporating local understanding and communities' efforts towards collectively peaceful conflicts resolution.

The present Nigerian government and oil companies have agreed to facilitate renewed interests in conflict management. However their approaches to resolving the crises remain

coercive and their attentions to local conditions and divergent stories of the risk of neglect are weak. Much of their strategies are quite dismissive of local concerns and the militant youth preferences. The present government strategies including the master plan approach may not yield fruitful results until the forces sustaining violence in the Niger Delta are targeted for remedies. These forces include frustration, chronic deprivation, corruption and ignorance. The solution to the intractable conflicts can be found within a framework of youth agency, local cultures and fragile state redemption. A major issue that came up during the survey is the critical importance of infrastructural development. It was emphasised that rapid transformation of the Niger Delta is likely to motivate the militant youth to lay down their arms. The success of peace making initiatives in the Niger Delta communities will be guaranteed if the unequal exchange relationship that placed the region in a disadvantaged position is balanced.

In this regard, the Nigerian State and multinational oil companies can promote peace and tranquility in the country if they collectively agree to put the Niger Delta at the centre of their priorities. Furthermore, private-public partnership can help to speed up development of the Niger Delta through provision of modern technological facilities and social welfare package that can transfer the region from its present dungeons to industrial areas. The hide out of militant youths should be opened up and replaced with broad streets with tarred road, regular lights, modern schools and information and communication technology centers. However, the solution goes beyond employment creation for the youth. A major issue raised by some respondents is that some of the youth lack basic education and they are not ready to learn again at their age since they have been seeing money. There is therefore a need for social rehabilitation that will re-equip the youth with positive thinking and understanding the evil of violence.

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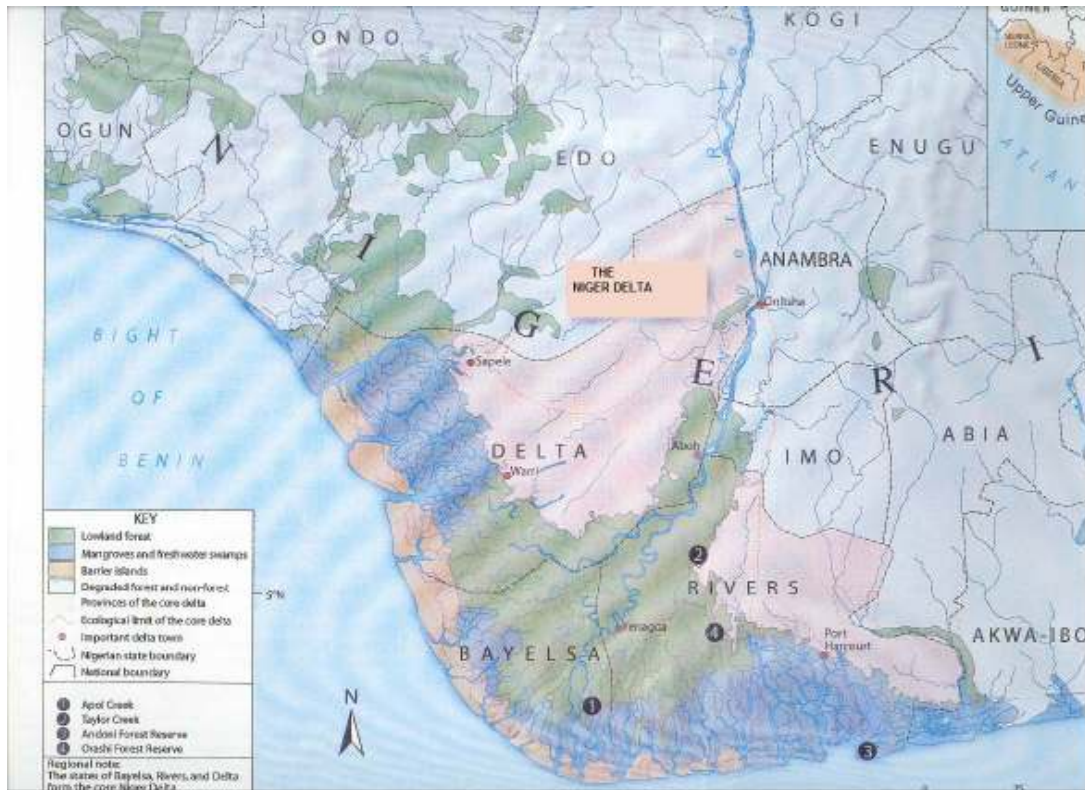
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Appendix 1: Map of the Niger Delta of Nigeria



Appendix 2: Map of Nigeria



Appendix 3: Map of Africa Showing Nigeria

