

# ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES AND NIGERIA'S NIGER DELTA CRISIS IMPLICATIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND GLOBAL PEACE

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**Abstract:** The contemporary history of Nigeria is confronted with issues arising from the crisis in the Niger Delta region. These issues are highlighted by the conditions of abject poverty under which the inhabitants of the region live. Nigeria is bound to deal with environment in which to pursue its goals of economic and social development. The processes for the production of petroleum and gas from the Niger Delta, and the political and environmental conditions put in place by both the state laws and multinational oil companies, in which the wealth of the Niger Delta is tapped and distributed, determine the contemporary history of instability in the Niger Delta and eventually, the history of the entire nation of Nigeria. In summation, the present circumstances of the Niger Delta include; neglect by federal, state and local governments, destruction of natural resources by oil extraction, gas flaring and pollution, and other perceived social and political injustice. Thus, the population left in abject poverty cannot, but remain restive and openly violent on every occasion.

**Keywords:** Civil society, Global peace, Governance Sustainability

## I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the crisis in the Niger Delta appears to be upscale, especially with the dangerous dimension of hostage-taking of foreign oil workers by the restive youth. The anger in the youth is almost beyond placation and Nigeria now has to contend with circumstances akin to terrorism from these militant youths, with far-reaching implications for sustainable development as well as global peace and security.

These material conditions have put a number of issues to the fore; First, is resource control a viable

option in Nigeria?, Second; how can the control of resources be democratized and taken out of the sole control of the federal government to the states and local communities in which such resources originate? How can accountability be instituted at every level of the Nigerian government so that aggrieved communities as those in the Niger Delta can return to a situation in which they can concentrate their efforts on sustainable development?

This paper, in line with the theme of the conference will examine its implications on sustainable development, global peace and security.

The Niger Delta crisis is symptomatic of a society in a state of anomie and its attendant culture of institutionalized violence. It is the consensus of most political scientists that the crisis is a by – product of the contradictions of the political history of the Nigerian federation and the attendant conflict of interests.<sup>1</sup>

The persistent over-heating of the polity is perhaps due primarily to the fact that Nigeria as a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society consists of over 250 ethnic nationalities speaking over 400 distinct languages. Nigeria also has one of the largest Muslim populations in the world, estimated at about 75 million concentrated in the north of the country. Tensions between the Islamic law, Shari a (practiced in most Northern States) and civil courts has remained a major challenge for peace and stability.

The complexities of the Nigerian federation breeds discontent amongst the citizenry, culminating in growing agitations among the various ethnic and religious constituents who are probably not satisfied with the present structure of the Nigerian Federation, manifesting in the upsurge of ethnic militias agitating for freedom, justice and equity. Thus, *'the government has to strike a balance between the interests of*

*these numerous and contending nationalities. As political leaders and groups, religious sects and tribes constantly clash in search of new identities and frontiers, the nation glides dangerously towards precipice*.<sup>2</sup>

Nigeria since the return of democracy in 1999 has been undergoing a difficult economic and political transition after 30 years of military rule. Economic mismanagement, macroeconomic instability, political repression and institutionalized corruption have undermined social and economic development and fuelled dramatic increases in poverty. The poverty rate of 70 percent, coupled with the large population of unemployed and underemployed young people (an estimated 43 million Nigerians are between the ages of 15 and 29 years) increase the risk of conflict and violence in the Nigerian society.<sup>3</sup>

Nigerian citizens regard unemployment as the single most pressing problem affecting the country. Social isolation or alienation is also a major problem contributing to violence and conflicts as identified in participatory poverty studies, particularly in urban areas but increasing in rural ones as well.<sup>4</sup> Young people who are unemployed and who lack social support networks are highly vulnerable and potential recruits to ethnic religious, and/or political violence and conflict.

The challenge of this paper therefore is to identify those youths most at risk, to find opportunities for meaningful engagement with them, and to develop strategies that will channel their energies in more positive directions. This is the practical way to curb the youth restiveness in the Niger Delta.

## II. THE NIGER DELTA AND THE EVOLUTION OF YOUTH RESTIVENESS

The Niger Delta is an area of more than 28,000 square kilometres of mangrove swamps and coastal waterways which stretches for over 300 miles. Niger Delta is one the world's largest wetlands. It covers an area of about 110,000 square kilometres and about eleven percent of Nigeria's land mass and crisscrossed by a larger number of streams, swamps, canals and creeks. The coast line is buffeted throughout the year by the tides of the Atlantic Ocean while the mainland is subjected to flood by the various rivers, particularly River Niger and its tributaries.<sup>5</sup> Politically or ecologically, Niger Delta constitutes five strategic States of Nigeria's 36 States. They include Rivers, Bayelsa, Delta, Akwa Ibom and Cross River States. The other oil producing States though not in the heart of the Niger Delta include Edo, Ondo, Imo and Abia States. The core Niger Delta States of Rivers, Bayelsa, Delta, Ondo and Cross River States are mainly inhabited by the Ijaw ethnic group, the fourth largest ethnic nationality in Nigeria.

The Niger Delta has 'suffered vicious economic, political and military repression since crude oil was discovered in the region in the late 1950s. The people of this region have consistently accused the Nigerian state and multi-national oil companies, particularly the Royal/Dutch Shell Company of working in criminal alliance to orchestrate the violence in order to perpetuate exploitation and expropriation of the region's oil resources which accounts for more than 90 percent of Nigeria's total GDP'.<sup>6</sup>

Despite its huge asset to the Nigerian nation, this area is characterized by extreme poverty, serious dearth of serviceable infrastructure and environmental degradation occasioned by oil spillage and gas flaring. It is the least developed region with about 70 percent of the population living below poverty lines with millions of unemployed youths.

The biggest culprit in the entire conflagration is the multi-national oil companies. Their shortcomings, especially in the area of community development/social responsibility have led to the volatile atmosphere of protest and destruction of oil production activities, a reputation the people of the area have come to be identified with.

Like a cankerworm which has eaten deep into the fabric of its host, youth restiveness has turned a Frankenstein monster of sort on the body politic of the region and the Nigerian state. Youth restiveness manifests into violent or terrorist activities via kidnapping or hostage-taking of foreign oil workers, pipeline vandalism, oil theft and outright destruction of oil facilities and properties of perceived enemies. Rampaging militia groups force oil companies to scale down activities with crude oil prices reacting sharply to the orgy of violence.

## III. TERRORISTS OR FREEDOM FIGHTERS?

The agitations in the Niger Delta have gone a step further via terrorist or criminal dimension. The militant youths have resorted to kidnapping expatriate staff of oil companies in their alleged desire to have better deal for their people. Hostage-taking has become a lucrative trade in the Niger Delta. Thus, foreign oil workers have become easy prey for this corrupt and violent business. When these hostages are taken, huge sum of money is always involved in the negotiation for release. The question that now agitates peace builders in the Niger Delta is whether the motive of this struggle has not been misplaced. Are they terrorists of freedom fighters?

Leading these new terrorist groups are some militant groups who have claimed responsibilities for several kidnappings of foreign oil workers and attacks on oil installations since late 2005 when the restiveness escalated. A leading militant group, the Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND)<sup>7</sup> has

stated in e-mails to media houses that it was waging an armed struggle to prevent Nigeria from exporting oil. The group whose attacks have been mainly on installations belonging to Shell said at the inception of these attacks in 2005 that; "we will attack all oil companies, pipelines, loading points, export tankers, tank farms.....etc"<sup>8</sup>

In negotiating for the cessation of attacks with the Nigerian government, MEND gave such conditions as "the release of Asari Dokubo, leader of the Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force (NDPVF) and ex-governor of the oil-rich Bayelsa State, Dipreye Alamieyeseigha who are being detained and tried by the Nigerian authorities for alleged treason and money laundering respectively. They also demanded for the "payment of compensation of \$1.5 billion by Shell as damages for pollution suffered by communities in Bayelsa State and related issues such as compensations and claims relating to the operation of oil companies in the Niger Delta"<sup>9</sup>

The question then is what are the real explanations of these cycles of violence in the Niger Delta. Austin Onuoha, in his paper titled "Transforming Conflict Resolution Initiatives in the oil-bearing Niger Delta Region of Nigeria" seems to have provided the answer:

*"More interesting however, is the fact that almost all the conflicts in the Niger Delta can be found in other areas of Nigeria. Second, what we term the causes or explanations for these conflicts are also present in other non-oil bearing areas.*

*What then is unique about the conflicts in the Niger Delta? First and most importantly is what I will call the internationalization of the conflict in the area. Let us take a simple issue as communal land dispute which is a common feature of Nigerian communities. In other non-oil bearing communities, land disputes are resolved either by recourse to tradition, history or law. But in the Niger Delta, the parties multiply while the stakes become higher. For instance, the government might be interested, the oil companies, communities, individuals and so many others"<sup>10</sup>*

Another possible cause of the uniqueness of conflict in the Niger Delta could be said to be the systematic marginalization of the people of the area. In Nigeria's geo-political equation, the Niger Delta people who are mainly the Ijaw ethnic group are a minority group. So they do not have much influence on what happens to the resource from their area. This is in spite of the fact that they bear the brunt of the unintended consequences of the exploration of oil e.g. oil spill, pollution, environmental degradation etc.

But more importantly is that the oil phenomenon

happened on Nigeria at a time when the military have taken over the reins of governance and being particularly irresponsible, they (the military) concentrated on squandering the revenues from oil and ignoring the people. But a critical factor that we must bear in mind is that 'oil does not cause conflict it only affects the dynamics of conflict'.<sup>11</sup>

#### IV. ROLE OF THE CIVIL SOCIETY

It is obvious that civil society groups in Nigeria have done a lot in preventing violence in the Niger Delta region. Their strategies have been many and varied. First, it was through the activities of civil society groups that the issues in the Niger Delta were brought to the fore.

These are mostly through seminars and trainings to build capacities. These trainings are focused on non-violence and peace building, conflict resolution and mediation, gender, development, human rights and community building and leadership. All these have been aimed at imparting the requisite skills so that the people of the Niger Delta can non-violently engage the oil companies and government in dialogues for development.

Civil society groups in Nigeria have also intervened directly in Niger Delta communities. These organizations have had the privilege of carrying out several interventions in different communities with in the Niger Delta region through various forms of visitations. They include such groups as the Civil Power Africa, Ecumenical Council on Corporate Responsibility (ECCR), Trocaire, Oxfam, Ireland Aid, CRS, USAID and so many others.

The essence of these visitations was to experience firsthand, the situation in the Niger Delta. It was after one of such visitations that shareholders of one of the oil companies passed a resolution asking the company to ensure global standards in their environmental practice in the Niger Delta region.

Civil society groups have also done extensive work in advocating on behalf of Niger delta communities for governments to do more, especially in determining policy responses. For instance, they have tried to harmonize various development projects embarked on by the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), oil companies and governments. This was to forestall duplication of projects in this area.<sup>12</sup>

#### V. RECOMMENDATIONS

Against the backdrop of youth restiveness and violence in the Niger Delta which constitutes threat to national and global peace and security, many recommendations have been made on how the escalating violence could be brought to the barest minimum.

Summary of such recommendations made by different stakeholders in various workshops and conferences include the following:

1. *'Formation of a youth-led regulatory body.*
2. *States in the Niger Delta to be represented in the body.*
3. *Establishment of a Trust Fund by the government and a certain percentage of youth development fund by multinationals in the Niger Delta to be paid into the Trust Fund*
4. *Merger of youth bodies and harmonization of their interests to strengthen them.*
5. *Multinationals should be part of the regulatory body for technical support, including capacity-building.*
6. *Youth reorientation as part of the discipline needed to bring about development in the region.*
7. *Evolving credible leadership and a process of ensuring checks and balances, accountability and transparency; constructive engagements; equity, justice and fairness in the communities*
8. *Multinational / oil companies must show more practical desire to develop and empower the youths and that traditional occupations should be revived and encouraged.*
9. *Youths were enjoined to take up and accept challenges even as the government was urged to demilitarize the region, evolve an electoral process that would usher in a regime of free and fair elections that would make it possible for the electorate to choose representatives of their choice.*
10. *Transparency in the relationship between oil companies and their host communities; the NDDC should be adequately funded and adequate basic infrastructure be provided in the Niger Delta while deliberate effort should be made to ensure good governance in the region.*
11. *Positive attitudinal change on the part of the youths be encouraged; youth empowerment programmes should be sustained; poverty eradication programmes should be intensified; federal and state governments, oil companies, NDDC and other corporate bodies should be involved in employing the youths.*
12. *Oil multinational corporations should adhere to international environmental standard in the award contracts to people in their host communities.*
13. *Environmental education and re-orientation for stakeholders, direct share of oil revenue among host communities, thereby increasing their stake in the oil economy, strengthening of relevant environmental laws and the implementation of existing legislation.*
14. *In conjunction with oil prospecting multinationals, Government should initiate a Marshall Plan adapted to suit the development of the needs of the Niger Delta and engage appropriate agencies for*

*expeditions and effective implementation''.*<sup>13</sup>

## VI. CONCLUSION

The role of the international community in the Niger Delta is critical and pivotal towards global peace and security. The international community especially the European Union (EU) must start a dialogue through civil society groups in Nigeria and government authorities in Nigeria. The EU and other western organizations must seriously consider the establishment of a Niger Delta Resource Center. This center will act as a clearing house for issues arising from the communities. This center will be a place where all correspondence between the oil companies, government and communities would be domiciled for follow-up.

Also reputable citadels of learning and development agencies like Ontario International Development Agency can commission research initiatives on conflict analysis to inform their strategy for intervention in Nigeria. I am aware that USAID and DFID have been sponsoring similar initiatives recently in Nigeria. These organizations and institutions must recognize and identify those institutional mechanisms in the Nigerian constitution that can be used to resolve conflicts, promote human rights and good governance. For instance, such bodies as the Council on Prerogative of Mercy, Legal Aid Council, Public Complaints Commission, and National Human Rights Commission, the various legislative committees on human rights, Peace and Conflict resolution NGOs must be awakened to their responsibilities. As we deliberate on these issues in the different plenary sessions, I am sure the theme of this conference will be tackled head-long.

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