

Local Governance and Regional Crisis in Nigeria: Rethinking Governance Dimensions to the Crises In the Niger Delta Region

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ABSTRACT

The fact remains that the Niger Delta region of Nigeria is faced with worrisome challenges that have devastated the environment and collapsed the local economy of the region. The region for quite some time now has been riddled in large violent pattern of conflict with palpable hatred, scorching fury and mayhem. Attempts have been made by scholars to locate the source of the crises of the region. Bulk of the contributions on this issue attributes the crises to external factors such as the activities of oil industries, i.e. the exploration and exploitation of oil which excludes the aborigines from the oil wealth. Others argue that the discriminatory revenue sharing of the federal government accounts largely for the challenges in the area. While these external factors may seem convincing as the causes of the problem of the region, they are causally deceptive and attempt to shift attention away from the core cause of the region's nightmare. They are merely the symptoms of the problem and not the core causes of the problem. The aim of the paper is to rethink the source of the problem of the Niger delta region. Data was gathered through focus group discussion, participant observation and secondary sources. Analysis was by simple polemics. The paper submits that the cause of the Niger Delta challenges lies largely in the internal governance which is sufficiently depraved. It recommends among others that leadership at the region should be subjected to thorough reorientation and that the electoral process should be organised in a modern form to guarantee the election of leaders who are pro-people.

KEYWORDS: Governance, Niger Delta, Internal Leadership

INTRODUCTION

The Niger Delta region is replete with unpleasant challenges that have devastated the region and kept it in a state of hopelessness. The level of environmental degradation and chequered local economy has created the appalled conditions that have thrown the region into consistent crises and communal degeneration. As pointed out by Okoko and Ibaba (1997), the region has been engulfed in terrible violent pattern of conflict for some time. Thus from Ke to Bille, Ogidigben to Okerenkoko, Ewoama to Okpoama, Emohua to Ogbakiri etc, it has been palpable hatred, scorching fury and mayhem. Basse's (2002) contention that the Niger Delta region is in a vortex of social conflict as crisis of underdevelopment combined with mass conscientization of youths threaten accelerating patterns of revolutionary insurgence, came to pass in the recent spate of kidnapping, vandalism and armed violence that engulfed the region in the last four years.

Despite abundant natural resources and oil wealth, the majority of the inhabitants of the region remain in poverty. Infrastructure is in total decay, and where they are found they are provided in a substandard way. The relationship between wealth and poverty in the region has been christened variously by scholars in the following terms: the oil of poverty (ANEJ, 2004) the antinomies of wealth (Ibeanu & Ike, 2006), the resource curse (Ross, 2003), the paradox of plenty (Karl 1997), the burden of oil (Curson, 2007), Blood and Oil (Anderson, 2001), oil and trouble water (Kemedi, 2005), where vultures feast (Okonta and Douglas, 2001). The argument of these scholars and the choice of these identities are unique. They all express the unique fact that so much of oil and gas revenues are rapaciously taken away from the region without a corresponding transformation of the region in terms of basic facilities and human welfare. Currently, the Niger Delta is a place of frustrated expectations and deep-rooted mistrust, giving rise to the unprecedented restiveness, which often erupted in violence (Emuedo, 2011).

Arguments abound as to the causes of the turmoil and the devastation of the region. Many principally attributed the situation to the activities of oil multinationals and international conspiracy. It is the argument of this paper that internal governance lies at the core of the problem of the Niger Delta. It is therefore posited that the devastation in the Niger Delta is the failure of governance manifested in the unconcern character of the polity about the plight of the region.

OBJECTIVE OF THE PAPER

The principal objective of this paper is to rethink the causes of the Niger Delta problems. Specifically, the paper seeks to examine the contribution of internal governance system to the perennial challenges in the Niger Delta region. It is also to show that relying on the perceived exogenous factors as main causes of the problem of the Niger Delta is misleading and constitutes a smoke-screen.

METHOD

The qualitative research method was largely applied in this study. Data was collected from both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources included the participant observation method and focus group discussion (FGD). The author's experiences as a resident and member of the Niger Delta region provided necessary data for the analysis. Secondary sources included studies conducted on the Niger Delta region, submission of scholars on the nature of the problem of the area as well as internet sources. The analysis was done on the basis of simple polemics.

AREA OF STUDY

Delineating the Niger Delta region has attracted varied scholastic arguments. Ibaba (2005) clearly agrees that attempt at defining the area has elicited different views. While some attempt emotional definition of the area without recourse to geography, others have attempted emotionally-detached effort at describing the boundary of the region.

The Oil Minerals Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC) (1993) defines the area as covering the tributaries of the river Niger and other rivers such as the Calabar River, Cross River and Imo River to the east and Siluko River, Benin River, Escravos River and River Forcados, to the west. It argues that seven states make up the Niger Delta region namely Rivers, Bayelsa, Delta, Akwa Ibom, Cross River, Ondo and Edo States.

The Willinks Commission report of 1957 defines it as a region that lies between the Ibo plateau and the Cross River valley. The Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) defines the area as oil producing states. By this, it included Imo, Abia and Ondo states as Niger Delta states. This view has been widely refuted (Ibaba, 2005). As argued by Tamuno (2000), the dominant view defines the Niger Delta within six constituent states namely Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo and Rivers. Emotionally, Ibaba (2005) distinguishes Akwa Ibom Bayelsa, Delta and Rivers State as core Niger Delta states.

The region is one of the world's largest wetlands, and Africa's largest delta covering some 70,000km (World Bank, 1995). The region has a large deposit of crude oil and has resources upon which the Nigerian economy depends. The ethnic nationalities that make up the region include: The Ijaw, Itsekiri, Isoko, Ogoni, Urhobo, Ikwere, Ika, Abua, Efik, Ibibio, Oron, Obolo, Ejagham, Ekoi etc. The people primarily make a living through fishing and cash food farming.

Theoretical Framework.

The theoretical framework adopted for this article is the rentier state theory. The basic argument of the theory is that countries that depend so much on oil revenue predominantly generated from external markets tend to become too unaccountable to their citizens and autocratic. Cheap access to oil revenue by rentier state leaders creates the mentality of corruption and retrogression in overall development of the society. This theory explains why some countries like Nigeria with abundant oil wealth perform worst than their resource-poor counterparts.

The basic characteristic of a rentier state is that there is a clear absence adequate effort to generate revenue from domestic taxation arising largely from the presence of their naturally endowed wealth. The theory of rentier state has been used to explain the prevalence of authoritarian regime types in the Middle East as well as Africa and a conspicuous absence of responsible democratic practices in these regions.

The theory explains the article in the sense that the quantum of money that comes from oil rent induces undemocratic and rogue leadership that is only interested in amassing state wealth to the detriment of the development of the region where the wealth is derived. The implication is that the exclusion of the region from the benefit of the oil wealth generates tension that has escalated into large scale violence and massive destruction of lives and property. The proponents of the theory include Beblawi, Luciani Mahdavy

LITERATURE REVIEW

The key concept central to this study is governance. The extent to which governance addresses the problem of Nigeria is important in understanding the perennial challenges in the oil rich Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The

practice of governance has long been with men as an organised being. Its conceptualisation has however attracted diverse understanding. For UNDP (2001), governance is the exercise of economic, political and administrative authority to manage a country's affairs at all levels. It comprises the mechanisms, processes and institutions, through which citizens and groups articulate their interest, exercise their legal rights, meet their obligation and mediate their differences.

Governance could also be seen from the perspective of financial accountability and administrative efficiency. Questions related to democracy, human rights and participatory processes constitute wider concerns of governance (Rogers and Hall, 2003). The conception of Roger and Hall also explain the political elements to governance which involves balancing various interests and facing political realities. Governance as a political factor therefore refers to the process of taking decision and the process of implementing such decisions. It is the art of making rules, revising them, enforcing them, managing the economy and controlling public service. European Commission (2003) speaks of governance as the state's ability to serve the citizens. It refers to the rules, processes and behaviour by which interests are articulated, resources are managed and power is exercised in society. The way public functions are carried out, public resources are managed and public regulatory powers are exercised is the major issue to be addressed in that context. Governance therefore is a process – how things are done, not just what is done. It requires more than a focus on government. It also relates to the nature of relations between states and society (Odi, 2006).

Contemporary emphasis has shifted from mere governance to qualifying concept of good governance. Though current emphasis dwells on good governance, the worry about how to govern well is not new (Ijim-Agbor, 2012). It occupied the central thought of Aristotle on how people should lead a flourishing live in ancient Greece. By the Cotonou Partnership Agreement, Article 9.3, good governance is the transparent and accountable management of human, natural, economic and financial resources for the purposes of equitable and sustainable development, in the context of a political and institutional environment that upholds human rights, democratic principles, and the rule of law. In clear terms, for any form of governance to be adjudged good, it must subscribe to certain clear cut characteristics. These include; participation, consensus-oriented, accountability, transparency, responsiveness, effective and efficient, equitable and inclusive, and follows the rule of law (www.unescap.org). Good governance assures that corruption is minimised, the views of minorities are taken into account and that the voices of the most vulnerable in society (women, the poor and children) are heard in decision-making. It is also responsive to the present and future needs of society.

From these characteristics above, it could be seen that attaining good governance status could be a difficult task for some backward societies, but it is important that countries strive to exhibit these characteristics in their governance processes as the consequences of bad governance possesses the capacity to devastate a society and render it politically and economically impotent. For, as Rogers and Hall (2003) posit, poor governance leads to increased political and social risk, institutional failure and rigidity, and deterioration in the capacity to cope with shared problems. Kaufmann, Kraay and Zoidu-Lobaton (1999) have shown in their study that a strong causal relationship exists between good governance and increased development. For them, good governance has the capacity to cause higher per capita income, lower infant mortality rate and higher literacy. Effective governance is thus essential to poverty reduction as it can help the poor to help themselves (Akpabio and Akpan, 2010).

There is widespread agreement that good governance is perhaps the single most important factor in eradicating poverty and promoting development. The Economist (1999) holds that, of all the ills that kill the poor, none is as lethal as bad government. The issue of good governance and capacity-building is what we believe lie at the core of all of Africa's problems (Commission for Africa, 2005). The UN Millennium Project (2005) submits that there is no excuse for any country no matter how poor, to abuse its citizens, deny them equal protection of the law or leave them victims of corruption, mismanagement or economic irrationality. The assertions above underscore the sanctity of good governance in the development of any society.

It is pertinent to submit here that where governance is shoddy, no meaningful government reform can make any substantial impact. Development will be sustainable if it operates within a good governance framework. The Niger Delta problem is largely the problem of bad governance. It is therefore the intention of this paper to show how internal bad governance constitutes the bane of the region.

RETHINKING THE SOURCE OF THE PROBLEM

The Niger Delta region is immersed in multiple challenges that have made development a near impossibility. Some of these challenges include:

1. Environmental degradation
2. Poor health condition
3. Absence of minimal infrastructure
4. Poverty
5. General crises of uncertainty
6. Oil resource devastation (bunkering)
7. Restiveness

Oil activities in the Niger Delta region have been carried out without regards to environmental sustainability. Needless to chronicle the macabre of environmental depletion, that has occurred from 1956 to date. But let it be understood clearly that the region has been visited with oil;-related ecological warfare, large scale displacement and uninhabitable environmental conditions. Oil multinationals prefer to flair gases and pay cheap penalties rather than re-inject; thereby causing more damage to the environment.

The unfavourable environmental conditions leave the inhabitants in a perpetual state of bad health. Their sources of water are consistently polluted by oil spillages, and the air they breathe are saturated with hydrogen sulphide from gas flaring. Head or tail, the people of the Niger Delta are losing. What they drink is death. What they breathe is death.

In terms of basic infrastructure, what we find on ground does not equate amount of resources taken from the region. The general neglect of infrastructure has been rationalised on the grounds of difficult terrain. But the same difficult terrains permit them to exploit oil resources with ease. Infrastructural neglect has limited the people's fundamental access to services such as electricity, good road, safe drinking water, and health facilities. The Niger Delta area and the mass of its people are poverty stricken. Wealth is left in the hands of very few cronies of government or lackeys of oil multinationals or those who have decided to become internal warriors (militants). All these conditions leave the people in a complete state of uncertainty. The future for them looks bleak and renders no hope.

Survival is imminent. For some who are strong enough, oil bunkering becomes the next available option to survive. Others go into hostage taking and outright killing in order to survive or cause attention to be directed at them. The general result is the restiveness in the region which cost quantum of human lives and monumental loss in oil revenue to the federal government. The restiveness in the region has given it the name "Zone of Violence".

The problems of the region have been blamed on a plethora of factors (Ibaba, 2005). The dominant perceptions are that

- (1) The problems of the region are oil industry and the oil economy. Underdevelopment of the region therefore, is caused by the negative externalities of oil and gas production (Ikelegbe, 2011). Anikpo (1998) shares this idea. He argues that the oil industry should be blamed largely for the rot in the Niger Delta. Balogu (2009) also puts the blame on multinational companies. He argues that oil companies operated in a manner that disrespected the Niger Delta, destroyed breeding grounds for aquatic animals, killed fish and rendered soil infertile for farming purposes.

The work of Tuschl (2007) also points to the activities of oil multinationals especially in the area of environmental damage. He argues that the social and environmental cost of oil production have been very extensive. The Kaiama Declaration (1998) partly blames the devastation of the region on oil multinationals.

- (2) The second perception is that the problem of the region is extremely induced and attributed to marginality in the federal scheme. The region is mistreated because it belongs to the ethnic minorities, which is why it is deprived of the benefit of its oil and gas resources. Ejoor (2003) belongs to this school of thought. He pointed out clearly that the problems in the Niger Delta stem from the policies and implementation of federal government political iniquities. Tamuno (2012) partly shares the position of this school. He faulted the Nigerian federation and blames the woes of the Niger Delta on a nasty federal system operated in Nigeria. He declared that the practice of federalism in Nigeria is a practice of servitude and deprivation against the Niger Delta region. Ejibunu (2007) also argues that the structural deficiency of the Nigerian federation contributes to the crises of the region.

- (3) The third perception is that the crisis in the region is as a result of limited financial benefit seen in the trickle resources inflow by way of derivation fund. The basic argument of this perception is that development in the region will accentuate the moment more resources (financial for that matter) flow into the region either by way of resource control or increased derivation (Ikelegbe, 2011). Akpabio and Akpan (2010) are of this perception. They argue that the real oil benefits do not trickle down to the Niger Delta region in a significant amount, the result of which keeps the region perpetually poor and underdeveloped. Ibaba (2005) also shares the sentiment of this school. For him, the problem is how to allocate revenue for the development of oil producing Niger Delta communities.

None of the perceptions above has considered the factor of local leadership (internal governance system) and its contribution to perpetuation of the crises. By internal governance system, we are referring to the state government, local government and indigenous community leadership. While these perceptions which I consider external, may seem convincing as the causes of the problem of the region, it is the position of the paper that they are causally deceptive and attempt to shift attention away from the primary bug of the region. These perceptions suffer from unnecessary reductionism and uncausal explanation.

It is the position of the author that attention should be focused on the internal factor of bad governance as a fundamental cause of contemporary problems in the Niger Delta region. As argued by Ikelegbe (2011), if the underdevelopment posture is caused by meagre financial resources to the region, what has happened to the huge sum of money that the states and local governments received from derivation based funds since 2000? How have local governments and oil producing communities accounted for royalties paid by oil companies to them over the years? If we locate the problem of the region within the insensitivity of oil companies, who supervises their activities? If they fail to carry out their responsibilities and nothing happens to them, it means somebody has failed in his responsibility. In this case, governance has become a problem. As argued by Balogu (2009), the governments within the region fail to regulate or monitor the activities of oil multinational companies; therefore, environmental destruction is carried out with impunity. The regulation and protection of the environment falls under the public domain and therefore, is the responsibility of the state to act in that regard.

Environmental regulations are not followed by oil companies because the government has remained docile and complacent. The affected communities who lack power, wealth and equity cannot force oil companies to conform. Where they attempt to use open pressure (protest) to drive their demand, it is the same state government that unleashes state terror on them through their instrument of coercion (the police and the military). When the government fails to act, the oil companies who are there for profit maximisation will certainly cut corners. Oil companies will conform if internal leadership refuses to conspire with them to avoid the performance of their obligations to the region. What is common is a clear-cut conspiracy between local leadership and oil multinational companies on one hand and between the local leadership and the national government on the other hand against the collective interest of the region. The assertion that the failure of the multinational oil companies to apply good corporate ethics in their operations has now resulted in a situation of disruptive restiveness in the region (Emuedo, 2011) is rather simplistic. What has local leadership done to cause oil multinational to apply good corporate ethics? The failure of leadership to exert its power of control on the activities of oil companies and other stakeholders in the Niger Delta project is causal to the perennial conflict in the region.

At the local level of oil producing communities, traditional rulers and community leaders often fight over cheap royalties paid by oil companies. The practice is the complete embezzlement of such funds by few privileged individuals at the peril of basic amenities that such money could have provided for their communities. Empire building to harass oil firms for personal aggrandisement is a common phenomenon in local oil producing communities. Anikpo (1998) contends clearly that youths and women are ready tools in the hands of the privileged class who use them to further their selfish interest. Rentier attitude occupies the entire thinking and psychology of local leadership in the Niger Delta region.

Local governance is saturated with high level of attitudinal depravity. The level of corruption is high and the hope of reduction is not in sight. Balogu (2009) writes of leadership in the region as being highly corrupt. Public officials live very high luxurious life facilitated by their uncontrolled access to public wealth. The regional leadership possess high immoral credentials and operate within a common leadership culture of criminal

opportunism. The resources in the region and the revenue accrued from there are seen by local leadership as an opportunity to primitively enrich themselves and alleviate their poverty and those of their cohorts and cronies.

Depraved leadership attitude as argued by Ijim Agbor (2012) has the capacity to retard a country's development. Some governors of the region have suffered jail terms arising from the wanton looting of their state treasury. DSP Alamieseigha of Bayelsa State, Lucky Igbinedion of Edo State and James Ibori of Delta State were jailed for corruptly enriching themselves with the resources of their states. It is my view that it was not the oil companies, the international capitalist network nor the federal government that compelled them to plunder their states.

All massive development activities in the Niger Delta region are the effort of the Federal Government (e.g. OMPADEC, NDDC). What are the states and local governments as well as benefitting communities doing with their money? My argument is that if the local level governance has been sincere and consistent in the application of public funds to the challenges of the region, the problem would rather be reducing instead of the astronomical accentuation it has garnered in recent time. The application of public funds to infrastructural development by Governor Godswill Akpabio of Akwa Ibo State is an indication that if every local leadership applies its funds perfectly, the challenges in the Niger Delta region would have been aborted and by extension a reduction in restiveness.

Though the crisis of the region is traceable to many sources, primarily causal to it is the historical failure of governance at the local level. Ikelegbe (2011) argues clearly that governance dimension of the problematic is not just a reality of the nature of rulership and management of the region's affairs, but is causal, central to the persistence of crisis and indicative of why current management effort portends little prospects.

CHARTING A NEW DIRECTION

The governance structure in the region must be interrogated to eliminate the deficit in governance and inculcate the key issues in good governance. The factor of good governance practices must be entrenched in the region's leadership including the central government's relationship with the region. The level of attitudinal debauchery among our leaders is high. There is need therefore, to pouch themselves of the bug of poor governance. It is therefore, necessary to kick-start a massive re-orientation exercise from within. As the leadership attempts to blame the woes of the region on external factors, it should undertake internal assessment in order to identify its contributions to the region's problems. This is very important because those who advocate a new society based on new norms and new ethos must first come to terms with their personal contradictions.

The Nigeria's electoral process also contributes to propagating unpopular leadership not just in the region but all over the country. Where we run a choice-less democracy as is the popular case with Nigeria, there is the tendency of having leaders who are not pro-people. Such leadership is only interested in primitive accumulation of public wealth to the detriment of the society. The Niger Delta region is passing through this experience. I suggest candidly that the electoral process should be organised in a modern form to guarantee equal participation and the determination of the real choice of the people. It could help to enthrone leaders who are people-fearing since they know that poor performance will get them out of office as well as their party in the next election.

CONCLUSION

The Niger Delta region has suffered deprivation from the 1950s to date. Attempt at addressing the problems of the region has been very ephemeral. Frustration of the indigenous population has sporadically led to crises of diverse dimensions. As Ajaero (2009) puts it, in the few years that the militants have held sway in the Niger Delta, Nigeria lost trillions of Naira and about 1,000 lives. Nigeria made good money from oil in more than 50 years but this created more problems rather than improve living standards of the people (Chigbo, 2008).

We have a plethora of challenges in the region. The challenges of environmental degradation, the challenge of poverty, want of minimal infrastructure, challenge of uncertainty as well as restiveness. The gains in the Niger Delta are much if properly administered. Governance has a role to play in stamping sustained normalcy in the region.

The argument that the cause of the challenges in the region is external is rejected by this paper. I conclude that the challenges in the Niger Delta region are a function of poor governance as an internal causal factor. Our leadership need a re-orientation along the line of commitment to the ideals of good governance.

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